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**Mapping and Re-Mapping the City:
Representations of London in
Black British Women's Writing**

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Doctor of Philosophy

University of Sussex

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

Acknowledgements

My first thanks must go to my supervisor, Dr Denise deCaires Narain, without whose continued encouragement and support this thesis would not be in existence. Dr deCaires Narain's wisdom, intellectual guidance and pragmatic advice were invaluable to this research. Thank you to Dr deCaires Narain for always having the time to talk through ideas with me, reading numerous drafts of my work and offering constructive feedback on it. I am very grateful to her for motivating me to push myself academically, approach this thesis with intellectual rigour and, most importantly, finish the project.

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Thesis Overview

Thesis Abstract

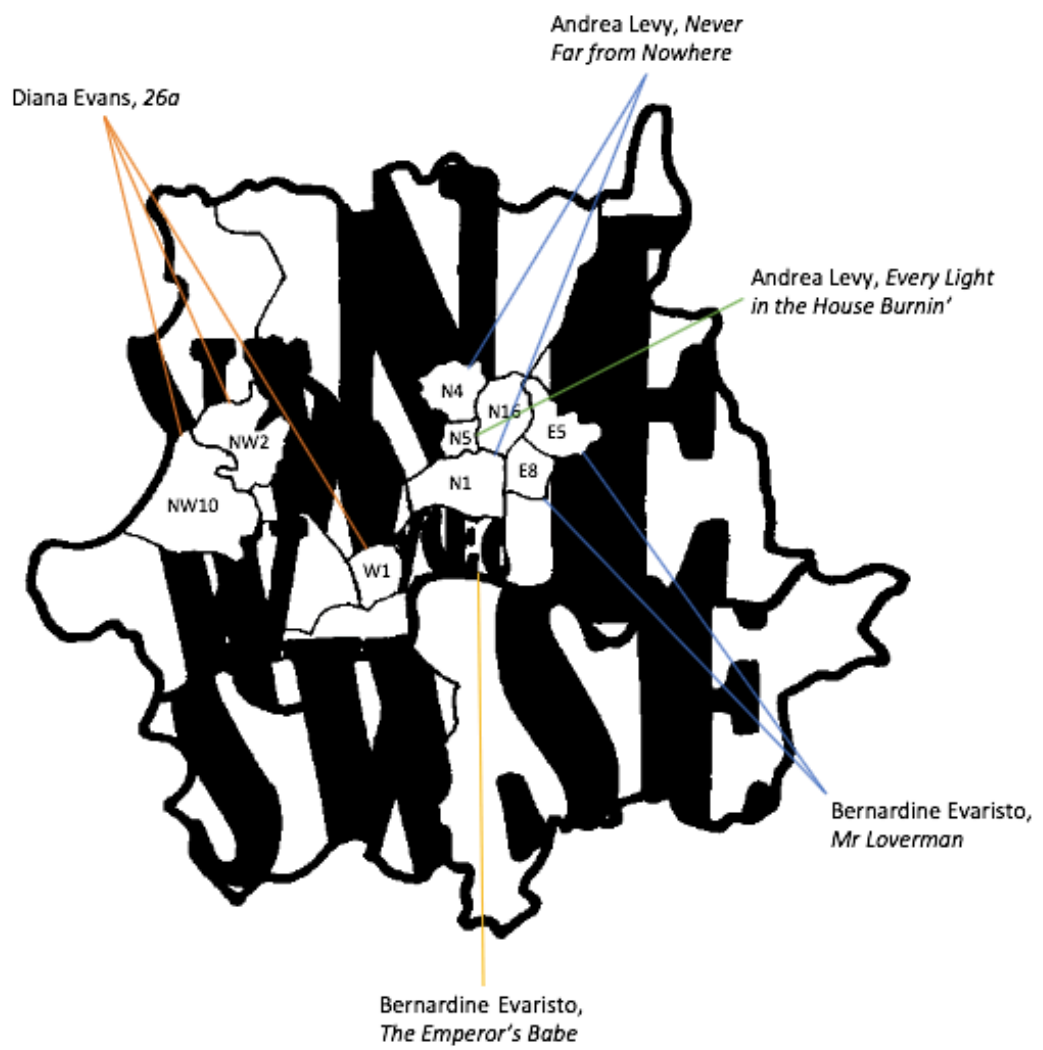
This thesis maps and re-maps literary London through an engagement with selected novels by Diana Evans, Bernardine Evaristo and Andrea Levy. The thesis builds on the work of very strong strands of black British women's writing, an area of writing that remains committed to the necessity of having to defend it. I argue that the literature of this group of contemporary women writers re-orientates trajectories of black British writing to focus on emerging distinctive London identities in the twenty-first century. The thesis charts a shift in black British women's writing which rewrites familiar postcolonial tensions around nationhood, displacement and un-belonging to articulate a rootedness in London. Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's sense of belonging stems from the city in which they were all born and raised, their 'London-ness' rendering a new form of selfhood which informs who they are and what they write.

The study is motivated by an agenda to critique black British women's writing outside of the historical paradigmatic racial and gendered identities through which it has traditionally been read. I wish to attend to women's writing in a way which disturbs the canon of contemporary British fiction, reconfiguring predominately male narratives of London life to present an alternative view of the city. The study assesses Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's contributions to and reappraisal of long traditions of women writing novels of family and home. The novels I engage with are localised within a particular London postcode, foregrounding the importance of microcosmic conceptions of home and domestic spaces to constructions of belonging in a multifaceted, complex urban environment such as London. The role of family is central to the authors' narratives and the thesis explores familial women's relationships which are both nuanced and complicated. The trope of sisterhood is deployed across the texts and raises profound questions concerning ideological constructions of belonging and home.

The thesis grounds itself intellectually at the nexus of debates in the fields of feminist discourse, postcolonial theory and contemporary urban theory, implementing them within a more fluid critical framework capable of reading the literature by this group of writers outside rigid categorising partitions. To not attend to questions of race and gender within their works would be to distort the thematic framework underpinning the novels. Nevertheless, I wish to re-inflect the ways in which we critique London writing to encourage the emergence of a new language which allows us think about it as organically diverse, rather than consciously or systematically 'multicultural'.

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Chapter One

Introduction: Mapping and Re-Mapping

*When you have London in a novel,
you don't need much else.¹*

This thesis maps and re-maps London through an exploration of selected novels by Diana Evans, Bernardine Evaristo and Andrea Levy. The work sets out to actively read the novels by this group of contemporary authors outside of the familiar critical, literary and discursive frameworks in which their writing has often been read. I am interested in challenging critical tendencies to solely approach this area of literature as 'black British' or 'postcolonial' and instead read it in a manner which recognises the authors' intimate relationship with the city in which they were born and raised. Very little scholarly attention to date has been paid to Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's novels' affiliation with London. This project aims to create a space for articulating the precise London locatedness of this literature, mapping the selected novels' confident assertion of a 'London-ness' which represents the complexities, contradictions and pleasures imbued in the contemporary city.

My own agency for bringing this material together derives from an urge to attend to women's writing in a manner which challenges inclinations to define their novels according to the identity categories to which they belong. The study is motivated by a political urge to disturb the canon of contemporary British literature and reconfigure predominately male narratives of London life. In offering an alternative conceptual framework through which to explore black British women's writing, I argue that Levy's, Evaristo's and Evans' work is grounded in London. This group of writers, all born and raised in the city, orientate their novels around specific London postcodes with which they are familiar, occupying new London spaces in new ways.

¹ Zadie Smith quoted in Barbara Chai, 'How Virginia Woolf and London Inspire Zadie Smith', *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 June 2007 [<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2012/06/08/how-virginia-woolf-and-london-inspire-zadie-smith>]

London has always been a shifting matrix of trends, identities and inhabitants. The capital's transculturalism is widely recognised and the writers selected for this thesis are some of the key figures representing its cosmopolitanism in cultural forms. Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's novels re-map the beaten trails of London literature, importantly representing the distinctive subjectivities and perspectives which contribute to definitions of the contemporary city. My engagement with the selected novels challenges critical readings of this work according to systematic 'multicultural' agendas and instead focuses on the literature as representing inevitably diverse, cosmopolitan and diasporic identities which inhabit the contemporary urban metropolis. In this sense, the thesis offers a literary navigation of London, transporting the reader on a journey through different communities, areas and postcodes to reflect a twenty-first century vision of the city.

The streets of London have their map, but our passions are uncharted:

Mapping London Literature²

I wish to begin with a brief mapping of the recent history of London literature to contextualise the cultural tradition from which the selected novels have emerged. London has long been a source of inspiration for British authors. The city's diversity, complexity and sheer density offers writers a rich 'melting pot' of subjects to explore.³ Over the past one hundred and fifty years, readers have trailed Joseph Conrad's Greenwich Park crime-scenes, the populated streets of Dickensian Lambeth, the noxious under-world of Wilfred Owen's Shadwell and attended gatherings at the 'Great Men's Houses' of Virginia Woolf's *London Scene*.⁴ As the list of familiar 'London writers' above makes clear, literary London's most historically prominent voices are members of an exclusive British cultural canon whose representations of the city conjure images of a predominately male and socially

² Virginia Woolf *Jacobs Room* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), p.6

³ Duncan Phillips, 'Into the melting pot', *The Economist*, 8 February 2014

[<http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21595908-rapid-rise-mixed-race-britain-changing-neighbourhoodsand-perplexing>]

⁴ See Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), Wilfred Owen, 'Shadwell Stair' in *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Random House, 2013), p.160 and Virginia Woolf, *The London Scene* (London: Daunt Books, 2013)

privileged society. As supposedly 'one of the world's most historically cosmopolitan cities', an important area of British culture has historically failed to represent London's prolifically diverse, myriad society.⁵

As Peter Fryer highlights in *Staying Power*, a black presence in Britain is long-established, noting that 'an African soldier is reputed to have reached Britain by about the year 210'.⁶ In spite of such research demonstrating a long history of black Britain, the arrival of former colonial subjects from the Caribbean in the mid-twentieth century is frequently referenced as the defining moment in modern migration narratives. The arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948, which transported 492 West-Indian migrants from Kingston, Jamaica, to Tilbury, England, initiated patterns of post-colonial migration which saw Caribbean migrants settle in London. In the years following the arrival of the ship there was an intensification of the black literary presence in London with Caribbean writers playing a crucial role in shifting the city's cultural milieu. One of the passengers on-board was the Trinidadian author, Sam Selvon, who in 1956 published, *The Lonely Londoners*, which narrates the experiences of a group of Caribbean migrants whose notions of London as the promised land are shattered by the racism and xenophobia they encounter in the city: 'English people starting to make rab about how too much West Indians coming to the country [...] 'You people think the streets of London are paved with gold?'"⁷

Written in a Trinidadian dialect which integrates musical qualities of Calypso, Selvon's novella signified an exemplary moment in the diversification of representations of London, assigning alternative narrative voices to the city. While radical in its depiction of previously under-represented London communities, the hyper-masculine tone of the text denies women characters a claim to the city. The novel's protagonist, Moses, along with his 'boys', occupy a London space in which their contact with women is presented as being conducted entirely through sexual encounters: 'if the date end in fiasco he know the boys would never finish giving him

⁵ John McLeod, 'Locating Postcolonial London' in *Postcolonial London* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), p.1

⁶ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2010), p.1

⁷ Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), p.2

tone for spending all that money and not eating'.⁸ While Selvon's generation, encompassing Caribbean writers such as E.R. Braithwaite and George Lamming, created an artistic space for subsequent generations of black British writers to map the city in their own terms, their work presents prevailingly masculine accounts of London life.

At the turn of the new millennium, the publication of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* marked a revival of black British literature alongside discourses of 'multiculturalism' promoted by New Labour's government. In spite of consistently denouncing the labels of 'black' and 'British', asking, 'why should I put up with being called "the black British author Zadie Smith"?', Smith is upheld as a gold standard in contemporary black British writing.⁹ To engage with this area of literature without a consideration of Smith's fiction would be to overlook the extraordinary contributions her work has made to the field of London literature. Nevertheless, her critical dominance has also limited the parameters in which other women London writers are defined. Evans' response to a question in an interview about critical tendencies to align her work with Smith's novels encapsulates the limiting ways in which this genre of literature is often interpreted:

I always knew it would happen. There aren't many young black female writers so there is a tendency to lump us together. I knew that people would pick up on the fact that our books are set in the same part of London but that's where I grew up, so why shouldn't I set it there? Does it offend me? Not really, I just think it's quite lazy.¹⁰

Evans' comments epitomise the processes through which authors such as herself, as well as Evaristo, Levy and Smith, have been pigeonholed precisely because of their race and gender. I wish to avoid such 'lazy' readings of this work by focusing less on the presumption of what they share as black British women novelists and attending

⁸ *Ibid*, p.81

⁹ Zadie Smith, 'I have a very messy and chaotic mind', *The Observer*, 21 January 2018 [<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/21/zadie-smith-you-ask-the-questions-self-doubt>]

¹⁰ Diana Evans quoted in Emine Saner, 'Don't call me the new Zadie', *Evening Standard*, 26 April 2005 [<https://www.standard.co.uk/showbiz/dont-call-me-the-new-zadie-7274402.html>]

to the demonstrable similarities in their remapping of London and their questioning of dominant modes of seeing and reading it. I have made a conscious decision to resist engaging with Smith's London-centric novels to create a discursive space in which to consider examples of London literature from other black British women writers, who, in my opinion, have not received the scholarly attention which their work merits. My strategic decision to not engage with Smith's work has allowed me to avoid the risk that the considerable body of critical responses to her work might over-determine my reading of Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's texts.

As the above makes clear, an exploration of London literature and the writers representing it, opens up an entangled network of London geography and history and evolving mappings of the city from new perspectives and locations. As Sukhdev Sandhu asserts, 'even a brief canter through black London history suggests that we need to find a new register with which to broach issues concerning ethnicity in the metropolis'.¹¹ Sandhu's analysis encapsulates the reality of assumptions about 'migrant writing' no longer being pertinent to a twenty-first century envisioning of the city. The selected novels move away from familiar representations of postcolonial or black London writing. As the map presented at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, the selected novels are set in residential communities in north, northwest, northeast London and in the case of Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, within the walls of Roman Londinium, now the EC City of London postcode. The novels were deliberately selected to reflect a moving away from areas such as Bayswater, Notting Hill and later Brixton, more familiarly associated with black British communities as exemplified by Selvon's and Braithwaite's novels in the 1950s and Linton Kwesi Johnson's poetry in the 1970s and 1980s respectively. This group of writers re-orientate representations of literary London to demonstrate the ways in which twenty-first century women subjects are navigating the city.

In 'Negotiating the Ship on the Head: Black British Fiction', Kwame Dawes distinguishes the contemporary generation of black British writers such as Evans, Evaristo and Levy from their predecessors, who he argues, carried a figurative 'ship

¹¹ Sukhdev Sandhu, 'London Calling', *Architectural Association School of Architecture*, 49 (2003) [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29544749>], p.56

on their heads'.¹² Dawes cites an 1815 cartoon of the London beggar, Joseph Johnson, who was 'known for wearing a hat topped by a fairly sizeable replica of a ship, complete with mast and sails with all their meticulous riggings'.¹³ Dawes deploys the image to argue that black Britons, have, throughout British history, had to wear a metaphorical ship on their head to denote his/her 'otherness': 'He literally wore the badge of his immigrant status – his sense of alienation and difference – on his head. The ship was his instantaneous narrative of journey'.¹⁴ I agree with Dawes statement that 'colonialism has ensured that Britishness is shaped significantly by race and discourse of whiteness and blackness are central to this definition', and equally share the optimism he invests in the emergence of a new generation of black British writers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.¹⁵ Dawes refers to both Levy and Evaristo as 'children of the earlier generation, born in England [...] to bi-racial parents' who 'do not carry the ship comfortably on their heads': 'They are introducing something of a dilemma in the British literary scene because they are often either *unwilling* to or *incapable* of wearing that ship that points to an immigrant identity or an identity of *otherness*'.¹⁶ Dawes' analysis of contemporary black British writing provides a productive starting-point for reading Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's work. The writers all consider themselves British and through their writing seek to 'redefine the national character of Britain and to achieve this by expanding the conception of Englishness or Britishness'.¹⁷

Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's novels present contemporary Londoners' concern over legitimate constructions of belonging, conflicting cultural expectations and the divisiveness brought about by difference. Yet neither their narratives, nor their characters, are defined by the 'migrant' anxieties which Dawes' essay observes. The selected novels by Evans, Evaristo and Levy represent an essence of black experience in London without stereotyping or reducing it. Although the writers' work occupies distinctive temporal, geographic and cultural spaces, they are unified

¹² Kwame Dawes, 'Negotiating the ship on the head: Black British fiction', *Wasafiri*, 14 (2008) [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02690059908589622>], p.18

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.19

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.20

through their portrayal of 'second-generation' women characters' distinctive assertions of selfhood in the city.¹⁸ Their writing collectively participates in a quiet, but persistent, refusal to be read solely within a racialised discourse, choosing to instead explore nuanced experiences within the city. This research insists on Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's 'London-ness' and I have consciously not anchored my interpretation of their work in the fact of the writers' 'blackness'. In foregrounding London, I have attempted to contest the primacy of the race narrative, re-orientating more familiar dialogues around this work. Nevertheless, it is very difficult to move away from the language of race.

In their presentation of black and mixed-race London characters, the selected novels contend that 'race' cannot be defined homogenously and must be attended to according to the contexts in which it is being interpreted. The five novels actively complicate and critique ideas around race to question the nuanced ways in which a black woman experiences the city, in comparison to, for example, a white man. Similarly to the novels' representations of gendered identities, the black/white dyad emerges as a means through which to investigate the relationship between identity-categories and a subject's relationship to the place and space around them. Stuart Hall's important work on the concept of race and racial identity as a 'floating signifier' is useful in comprehending the shifting of racial identities according to geographic, historical and cultural contexts. Hall contends that society's propensity to categorise and classify 'human types' connects the 'systems of classification' to 'the objects of the disposition of power'.¹⁹ Hall perceives race as a 'floating signifier' in the way in which it is re-signified and appropriated according to shifting cultural, political and historical milieus:

[...] race works like a language. And signifiers refer to the systems and concepts of the classification of a culture to its making meaning practices. And those things gain their meaning, not because of what they contain in their essence, but in the shifting relations of

¹⁸ The term 'second-generation' is deployed to describe subjects who were born in Britain to parents who migrated from elsewhere.

¹⁹ Stuart Hall quoted in Jhally, Sut, and Stuart Hall, *Race: The Floating Signifier* (Northampton: Media Education Foundation, 1996) p. 2

difference, which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field.²⁰

Hall's commentary reinforces the thesis' engagement with the specific ways in which racial identities are interpreted in diverse temporal, cultural and geographical locations which the selected novels present. The 'shifting relations of difference' which Hall refers to is exemplified by the antithetical depictions of blackness as a cultural signifier embodied by Olive in Levy's 1996 novel, *Never Far from Nowhere* and Bessi and Georgia in Evans' 2005 novel, *26a*. While the 'signifying field' of 1960s-1970s north London from which Olive emerges is one afflicted with institutionalised racism and narrow-minded attitudes towards difference, the 'concepts and ideas' which underpin Bessi and Georgia's 1980s-1990s London upbringing reflect a more cosmopolitan and open-minded mode of being which signifies meaning beyond the black/white dyad.

Mapping the Selected Novels

The selected novelists were born and raised in London to parents of mixed British, Caribbean and/or Nigerian origin. Levy was born in Highbury, north London in 1956. Her father immigrated to London from Jamaica on the Empire Windrush, arriving in England in 1948 and was subsequently joined by her mother later that year. Born in 1959, Evaristo was raised in Woolwich, southeast London, to an English mother and a Nigerian father. The youngest of the writers, Diana Evans, was born in Neasden, northwest London in 1971. Evans' father was English and her mother, Nigerian. She spent some of her childhood in Lagos, Nigeria.

A heuristic idea of the map presented by these novels assists in understanding the distinctive London landscapes in which these writers operate. As Sébastien Caquard and William Cartwright observe in their work on 'Narrative Cartography', maps have historically been deployed by authors and scholars to demonstrate the ways in which a 'narrative is 'locked' to a particular geography or landscape': 'Maps have not

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.8

only been used to decipher and geolocate stories, but to tell them as well [...] the potential of maps to both decipher and tell stories is virtually unlimited'.²¹ Caquard and Cartwright's querying of the ways in which 'different spatial settings' are embedded in stories is particularly pertinent to the selected novels' mapping of London from the microcosmically local or domestic to macrocosmically global depictions of the city. The thesis re-appropriates such ideas around the 'narrative potential of maps' to emphasise the specific London locatedness of the selected novels:

They [maps] can help to ground the action in a defined location, to increase the realistic dimension of the story and to ensure that the reader is totally aware of the geographical realities of the area in question. These maps can also serve as a spatial metaphor, as aesthetic elements and as narrative guidelines to help the reader of the audience follow the journey of a character.²²

The literal and metaphorical mapping of London which the selected novels evoke epitomises Caquard and Cartwright's definition of narrative mapping in presenting the 'realistic dimension' of London's contemporary history over the past three decades. From Levy's 1960-1970s north London social housing setting in *Every Light in the House is Burnin'* and *Never Far from Nowhere* to Evaristo's gentrified millennial presentation of Hackney in *Mr Loverman*, the novels chart the cultural and geographic realities of specific areas within the city.

The three writers maintain an intimate relationship with their particular corner of the city. They appear to write what they know – while Evans's 26a maps her native Neasden, Evaristo's use of language and dialects in both *The Emperor's Babe* and *Mr Loverman* reflects a generational and fashionable use of language which is rooted in a London-ness that derives from the intonation and rhythm of the east end's 'cockney rhyming slang'.²³ Levy's affiliation with north London is conveyed through

²¹ Sébastien Caquard and William Cartwright, 'Narrative Cartography: From Mapping Stories to the Narrative of Maps and Mapping', *The Cartography Journal*, 51:2, May 2014, p.101

²² *Ibid*, p.104

²³ 'Cockney rhyming slang' refers to an idiomatic use of the English language which originates from nineteenth century East London. Many of its expressions have been integrated into everyday uses

her mapping of Islington, Highbury and Finsbury Park in both *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Never Far from Nowhere*.

Published in 1994 and 1996 respectively, Levy's novels are the earliest works explored in the thesis and are quintessentially London in their mapping of threads of familial life in north London council estates, Islington pubs and overstretched NHS Central London hospitals in the 1960s-1980s. This earlier work receives little critical attention in comparison to *Small Island*, which won the 2014 Orange Prize for Fiction and The Whitbread award in the same year. It is these two semi-autobiographical novels that this thesis engages with. I have made a strategic choice to circumvent Levy's most famous novel precisely because of the fact that I think her earlier novels offer a more complex and challenging engagement with narratives of migration and Britishness. While *Small Island* in many ways returns to the familiar world of earlier black British texts, such as *The Lonely Londoners*, these earlier texts situate women characters within specific temporal and social London locations which I wish to explore.

These earlier novels are set on north London council estates and focus on the experiences of two Jamaican diasporic families. *Every Light in the House Burnin'* is narrated by Angela, who lives with her mother, father, brother and two sisters in a council flat in Highbury. While the realist novel charts everyday and 'ordinary' familial life, it equally exposes enduring racist attitudes entrenched in late-twentieth century British society. When Angela's father, Winston, becomes ill, Levy depicts the family's struggles in their encounters with the NHS and offers a social critique of the Welfare State and assumptions of equal access to it. In *Never Far from Nowhere*, Levy engages with similar social debates in her presentation of protagonist sisters, Olive and Vivien. The sisters grow up in social housing in Finsbury Park in the 1970s with their mother, Rose. Despite perceiving London as their home, people around them insist, '[y]ou're not English, are you?' or more aggressively order them to 'go back where they came from'.²⁴ Both texts explore the

of English language today. For further analysis, see 'Let's Take a butcher's at rhyming slang', *Oxford Dictionaries* [<https://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2011/06/15/rhyming-slang/>]

²⁴ Andrea Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere* (London: Headline Review, 1996), p.155 and p.106

intersection of race, gender, class and culture and its relationship to social mobility and opportunity. In this sense, Levy's novels are the most overtly political of all of the selected texts, maintaining a clear agenda in exposing the injustices connected to racial, gendered and social subjectivity.

Published at the turn of the century, in 2001, *The Emperor's Babe* is set in Roman Londinium in AD 211. The text is a product of historical research undertaken by Evaristo at the Museum of London while poet-in-residence there and charts the misrepresentation of London's history of immigration, challenging the prevailing ascription of 'otherness' to black Londoners'. As Evaristo argues:

Britain has always been multicultural, and to a greater or lesser extent, multiracial, certainly from the 16th Century when there were significant Black populations in the country. So, in one sense, *The Emperor's Babe* is a dig at those Brits who still harbour ridiculous notions of "racial" purity and the glory days of Britain as an all-white nation.²⁵

Evaristo's historical and literary excavation of London life arrives at a verse novel, written in hybrid Latin, Patois and cockney-rhyming-slang forms to reflect the multiplicity inherent to London's history. For example, phrases such as 'Let me ball-of-chalk you home, darlin'' are coupled with quotes by Roman poet, Juvenal: 'Never go out to supper without having first made your will'.²⁶ The intertextuality, linguistic playfulness and experimental form of the text reinforces Evaristo's case for re-envisioning London's hybrid and multi-layered origins.

The narrative centres around Zuleika, the daughter of refugees from Sudan who give her hand in marriage to an older, wealthy Roman, Felix. Zuleika defines herself as an 'unofficial' 'Londinium Tour Guide', introducing herself as a 'feisty, passionate, slightly bitchy, slightly petulant, drama queen'.²⁷ Zuleika asserts herself in the city with self-assurance and swagger, leading the reader around the 'darkened alleys'

²⁵ Bernardine Evaristo quoted in Karen McCarthy, 'Q & A with Bernardine Evaristo', *Valparaíso Poetry Review: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, 27 June 2013
[<http://www.valpo.edu/vpr/evaristointerview.html>]

²⁶ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* (London: Penguin, 2001) pp.14-15

²⁷ Evaristo quoted in McCarthy

and ‘narrow backstreets’ of her ‘stomping ground’.²⁸ In the manner in which she confidently navigates the city, asserting her belonging in the urban setting, Zuleika emerges as an embodiment of ‘second-generation’ attitudes upheld by this work and I wish to adopt her approach in mapping an alternative depiction of London in this thesis.

The thesis engages with one of Evaristo’s earliest works alongside her most recent. Published in 2013, *Mr Loverman* tells the story of Barrington Walker, an Antiguan-born and raised seventy-four-year-old husband and father who moved to London in his 20s and raised a family in Stoke Newington, or ‘Stokey’ as he terms it.²⁹ Predominately set in modern-day Hackney, with flashback episodes which recall memories from earlier stages of his life, the novel depicts Barrington’s coming to terms with his sexuality and exposing a life-long affair with his ‘friend’, Morris. *Mr Loverman* is the only novel with a male protagonist which the thesis examines. My rationale for selecting the text derives from an interest in understanding the gendered, sexual and racial factors which contribute to a subject’s experience of the city and supports the thesis aim of demonstrating that as a space, London embodies a wide-range of characters and qualities according to who is occupying it. An exploration of Barrington’s queer mapping of the city provides a lens through which to assess individual constructions of place according to specific subjectivities.

Published in 2005, Evans’ debut novel tells the story of twins Bessi and Georgia, who grow up, as Evans did, in Neasden, with their Nigerian mother Ida, Yorkshire father Aubrey, little sister Kemy, and older sister Bel. Evans’ story of biracial twins growing up in northwest London in 1970s-1990s London resists certain pathologies of race and gender that might otherwise prevent readers from perceiving the universal experiences of adolescence, kin relationships and tragedy that pervade the novel. The twins’ narratives offer new cultural possibilities through which women’s identities are created and re-created outside of racial partitions. The teenage-girls’ incessant anxiety over ‘the challenges posed by afros’ lightheartedly demonstrates

²⁸ Evaristo, *The Emperor’s Babe*, p. 11 and p.39

²⁹ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2013), p.118

that race remains an inescapable part of their maturation.³⁰ Yet, Bessie and Georgia's adolescence is afflicted by transcultural gendered insecurities, rather than anxieties brought about by an exclusively racial consciousness: 'The twins had arrived at breasts and cigarettes. They did not have cleavage, like Bel had when she was fifteen. They needed Wonderbras to get cleavage [...].'³¹ Evans realistically portrays the everyday cosmopolitanism of London life. As Suzanne Scafe highlighted at the Black British Women's Writing Conference in July 2014, Evans' novel charts the 'awkward and often challenging way in which characters belong, rather than the need to belong'.³² The London that Bessie, Georgia and their sisters inhabit reflects the modern metropolis as a meeting place for transnational and cosmopolitan identities.

There are numerous similarities to be struck in the portrayal of London across this group's body of work. The writers' work is unified in its capacity to not be bound by racial or gendered expectations, revealing the transcultural marks of kin and romantic relationships that connect women's experiences and equally those that are irritated by gendered, racial or sexual identities. In the selected novels, with the exception of Evaristo's *Mr Loverman*, the narrators are women and the protagonists' familial set-up is typically woman-dominated. While fathers play formative roles in the women characters' upbringing, brothers are generally absent. In particular, the characterisation of Caribbean fathers in Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and Evaristo's *Mr Loverman* refigures stories of post-Windrush disjointed London families presented in Selvon and E.R. Braithwaite's work for example.³³ The moving depiction of Angela's relationship with her Dad in *Every Light in the House Burnin'* dismantles homogenous stereotypes regarding absent Caribbean familial men: 'His hand that I had always held to cross the road.'³⁴ In this sense, the novels all share an

³⁰ Diana Evans, *26a* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 110 and p. 42

³¹ Evans, *26a*, p.110

³² Suzanne Scafe, 'Ruin and Recovery: A Spatial Reading of Diana Evans' Fiction', paper presented at the 'Black British Women's Writing Conference: Tracing the Tradition and New Directions', Brighton, (2014) [<http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/research/c21/events/events-calendar2/black-british-womens-writing-tracing-the-tradition-and-new-directions>]

³³ See Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* and E.R. Braithwaite, *To Sir With Love* (London: Random House, 2013)

³⁴ Levy, *Every Light in the House is Burnin'* (London: Headline Review, 1994), p.248

agenda in dismantling gendered stereotypes attached to constructions of racial identities.

The prominence of sister relationships in the selected novels equally connects the writers. In Levy's *Never Far from Nowhere*, the structure of the novel, alternating between accounts presented by Olive and Vivien exposes the productive and problematic implications of cosmopolitan living for young black women. The contrasting experiences of the sisters, one fairer skinned than the other, exposes the gendered and racial preconceptions imposed upon women in one of the world's most culturally diverse cities. In Evaristo's *Mr Loverman*, the precarious competitiveness between Donna and Maxine emphasises the surprisingly gendered and racialised politics embedded in sister relationships: 'I'm not like Maxine, with her anorexic BMI that even black men go for these days – betraying the race'.³⁵ The lack of solidarity between the sisters exposes women's complicity in perpetuating hegemonic expectations of 'feminine' embodiment. In Evans' *26a*, sister dynamics are integral to the novel's plot and facilitate a discussion of the emergence of contrasting and often conflicting constructions of selfhood within the same generation. Evans' own experiences of having a twin feed into the relationship between Bessi and Georgia that the novel presents. Her personal understanding of twin dynamics and their individual and collective relationship with the city adds another dimension to the narrative as the streets of London pose a threat to the twins' unity. While Bessie grows increasingly ambitious about pursuing a music career in bustling Soho, the London crowds and chaos heighten Georgia's anxiety and she withdraws from cosmopolitan life altogether. The sanctuary of *26a*, the loft that the title of the book is named after, sits at the top of their home at 26 Waifer Avenue and is inherent to the girls' 'twinness'; outside, on the daunting streets of London, their differences are exposed.

Beyond the similarities to be struck within their novels, the writers are connected in their approaches to their work and the burden of representation. Both Levy and Evaristo have publicly discussed their attempts, as young readers, to find

³⁵ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p. 225

representations of ‘themselves’ in British literature, imaginatively venturing across the Atlantic in search of inspiration. As Evaristo asserts:

Angry and hurt at my marginalised status, I rejected the English canon on which I'd been raised. I turned instead to the wave of brilliant African-American poets and prose stylists then hitting these shores: Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Michelle Cliff, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison. Their writings placed black women centre stage and inspired me to do the same.³⁶

Evaristo's comments resonate with my own critical choices and my decision to deploy a wide-range of theoretical models, including African-American criticism to read this body of work. Levy has equally addressed her sense of exclusion from the canonical English curriculum: ‘I was educated to be English. Alongside me – learning, watching, eating and playing – were white children. But those white children would never have to grow up to question whether they were English or not.’³⁷ It is difficult to determine conclusively whether this sense of exclusion is shared by Evans, given the lack of interviews or critical material on her work. Evans is also more reticent about public appearances. Nonetheless, I would venture that Evans' experiences as the youngest of the three writers discussed, combined with the impact of losing her twin sister, has shaped her literary concerns rather differently to Evaristo and Levy.

The thesis' approach to this work clearly identifies London as the most powerful force connecting these writers. London emerges as a productive space through which to negotiate representations of ‘themselves’ in British literature. In the case of Levy, as well as playing a formative role in her work, she appears to privilege her London rootedness over any other form of identification:

London as far as I am concerned is a country and very different from the rest of Britain. I grew up here and everything I know and understand is in London, and I really value that sense of belonging I feel in London. It's

³⁶ Evaristo, ‘Why is it still rare to see a black British woman with literary influence?’ *The Guardian*, 13 December 2013 [<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/13/rare-black-british-woman-literary-influence>]

³⁷ Levy, ‘This is my England’, *The Guardian*, 19 February 2000 [<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/feb/19/society1>]

really important to me, I feel like a Londoner, and I am.
I love that.³⁸

Levy's emphasis on her London identity ('I'm just a North London girl') and her presentation of women protagonists growing up in north London resonates with Evaristo's remark that 'My characters populate my versions of London' and Evans' claim that she 'had a story to tell' with regards to her relationship to her twin.³⁹ Addressing the autobiographical in relation to the writers' presentation of London raises some important questions concerning my deployment of the autobiographical nuances presented by the selected novels.

Mapping the Autobiographical

The role of the autobiographical within the thesis is ambivalent. On the one hand, I wish to offer an exploration of black British women's writing which liberates it from narrow interpretative discourses around the authors' identities. At the same time, in connecting the writers so intimately to London, the place in which they were all born and raised, I am ironically reading them 'through' the autobiographical in a way in which binds the novels to their authors. Throughout the thesis, I draw upon interviews with the writers, as well as their non-fictional works to aid the interpretation and theorisation of their fictional texts. My aim is to hold two such contradictory goals productively in tension with one another throughout the thesis.

The selected authors' representation of young women characters forging spaces for themselves in the city carries autobiographical undertones which, I would argue, enhance the novels' realistic mapping of the city in a way in which promotes Caquard and Cartwright's definition of 'narrative mapping'. This argument is offset by the reality of black British women authors too often being understood as

³⁸ Levy quoted in 'Conversation with Susan Alice Fischer' in *Andrea Levy*, (Ed.) Jeannette Baxter and David James (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.127

³⁹ Evaristo quoted in Jennifer Gustar, 'Putting History in Its Place: An Interview with Bernardine Evaristo', *Contemporary Women's Writing* (2015) [<http://cww.oxfordjournals.org/>] p.15 and Evans quoted in in Zoe Paxton, 'Zoe Paxton interviews Diana Evans: Death of a Twin,' *3am Interview* (2005) [http://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/2005/apr/interview_diana_evans.html]

correspondents for their race and gender, perpetuating certain patterns of reading this literature which this thesis attempts to evade. I therefore endeavour to consider the different ways in which the autobiographical comes into dialogue with these texts, without solely focusing on gendered and racial sensibilities. While I cannot completely avoid thinking about these writers as 'black British', I want to grant them the freedom to be read 'as writers' and not simply as representatives or spokespeople for their race and gender.

Suzanne Scafe's work on autobiography in black British writing has assisted my theorisation of the role it plays in the selected texts. Scafe notes that 'a tradition of black autobiographical writing' has supported the black woman writer's representation of 'black women's invisibility in cultural records and the absence of a textual self'.⁴⁰ Scafe's assertions provide a lens through which to understand the historical activism attached to writing by black women subjects, who have historically been excluded as writers. While a character such as Zuleika fits this mould, de-railing hegemonic white male narratives of the city and carving a space for herself in a patriarchal, elitist society through the use of her distinctive voice, I would argue that more generally, the novels deployment of the autobiographical belongs less to an autobiographical tradition revolving around the political assertion of voice and more to a personal sense of attachment to the geographic, temporal and cultural spaces created in the selected novels. The writers adopt the autobiographical as a literary device to render their presentation of London and their characters' mapping of it in a detailed, intimate and convincing manner.

In spite of a certain reluctance on my part to engage with Zadie Smith's novels as part of this project, I repeatedly call upon her theoretical work to support and reinforce my position. The first essay presented in Smith's collection *Changing my Mind* proves invaluable in helping me to conceptualise the tensions underpinning the autobiographical elements of the selected texts.⁴¹ Within the essay, Smith eloquently articulates her rationale for selecting her 'own freely chosen,

⁴⁰ Scafe, 'Let Me Tell You How it Really Was': Authority, Legitimacy and Fictive Structures of Reality in Contemporary Black Women's Autobiography', p.130

⁴¹ Smith, 'Their Eyes Were Watching God: *What Does Soulful Mean?*' in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009)

heterogenous reading list' as a young-person, 'never choosing books for genetic or sociocultural reasons'.⁴² Smith emphatically claims that she 'disliked the idea of 'identifying' with the fiction' in her reading of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*, working through her own struggles to come to terms with enjoying 'Hurston because she represented 'good writing', not because she represented me'.⁴³ Smith's remarks capture the quandary which underpins the inevitable subjectivity connected to the autobiographical. While this thesis undeniably relies upon the authors' autobiographical experiences of living in London, there is also a sense of the novels exceeding the boundaries of their authors in not relying upon what Smith terms as readers, "identifying' with the fiction'. The novels stand in their own right as examples of 'good' contemporary British 'writing' which has the potential to engage, move and stimulate readers who do not 'identify' with the writers.

While the texts are not simply expressions of experience, the role of the autobiographical is unavoidably important in the claim which I am making to these authors' specific relationships with London. The writers' experiences of living in London are mediated through the fiction and there is a sense of space and place in their mapping of the city that feels authentic and real. The ways in which personal experiences are integrated into the novels is exemplified by my analysis of an extract from *26a* in Chapter Two in which Evans compellingly captures a gendered encounter with the hedonistic 'nightworld' of 1980s Soho from having worked in the music industry and spent time there during this period.⁴⁴ While I aim to avoid the risk that Gayatri Spivak points to in suggesting that black or Asian writers are perceived as spokespersons for their ethnicity, race and culture, I also do not wish to omit the clearly influential role that the autobiographical plays; instead I aim to use it purposefully to further understand the novels' mapping of London.⁴⁵

⁴² *Ibid*, p.3

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.7

⁴⁴ Evans, *26a*, p.160

⁴⁵ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) pp.277-278

In an enlightening interview between Evaristo, and Evans, Evans confronts the fact that there is 'an assumption that the use of autobiography in fiction makes the work less valid or worthy'.⁴⁶ Evans' comments speak to my anxiety that referencing the autobiographical may render my analysis less scholarly. In the same interview, Evans acknowledges that writing *26a* felt like 'living in a time warp' in re-living her childhood in northwest London and her close relationship to her twin, Paula.⁴⁷ Here, Evans notes the all-consuming nature of writing and the deep creative and emotional pressures such experiences demand of the writer.

Evaristo also emphasises the powerful force of the autobiographical, arguing that:

[...] fiction is always rooted in autobiography because we are using ourselves, our emotions, experiences, perceptions, and of course drawing on people we have known and observed, even though we are fantasists and alchemists, fictionalising and transforming. We might escape ourselves in a fictional world but the black teenage girls who spoke their own fictional world is our creation, it comes from us.⁴⁸

It is for these reasons and in these ways that the autobiographical informs my reading of the texts.

Mapping and Re-Mapping Pertinent Areas of Scholarship

Here I map the key theoretical concepts that inform the chapters which follow. My starting point for a consideration of pertinent areas of scholarship in relation to the selected novels is to state that black British women writers continue to be forced to occupy a marginalised position within scholarship. The critical categories currently in place are not accommodating enough of this work - hegemonic feminism

⁴⁶ Evans quoted in 'Diana Evans in conversation with Bernardine Evaristo', *Wasafiri*, 20:45 (2005) [<https://doi.org/10.1080/02690050508589961>], p.34

⁴⁷ Evans quoted in *Ibid*, p. 37

⁴⁸ Evaristo quoted in *Ibid*, p.35

continues to struggle to attend to the social, cultural and racial nuances which shape women's experiences; whereas race-related discourses within the realms of both scholarship and politics, continue to pursue an agenda which overlooks the specifically gendered racism women subjects are exposed to. The seeming failures of both discourses to integrate the voice of the black woman writer has resulted in, as Irenosen Okojie has noted, a form of literary and scholarly 'ghettoization'.⁴⁹ I wish to respond substantively to this deficit in the critical landscape.

As indicated above, while I wish to avoid continuously resorting to the 'black British woman' paradigm, my research has inevitably come into dialogue with black feminism and postcolonialism in attending to the gendered and racial subjectivities presented by this group of authors' writing. To not address the relationship between gender and race within these works would be to distort the authors' motivations for writing the novels. Nevertheless, I wish to implement such identity categories within a more fluid critical framework capable of reading this writing outside of rigid scholarly partitions.

The tendency to focus solely on the racial or gendered identities of the authors and/or the literary characters they create, limits opportunities to read this literature in alternative scholarly and artistic contexts. The wide range of theoretical models deployed in this thesis is a strategic necessity and is powered by my commitment to respond as fully and diversely as possible to the selected writers' works in attempts to avoid pigeon-holing them in the usual critical categories of 'black British women'. While the thesis grounds itself intellectually at the nexus of feminist discourse and postcolonial theory, I appropriate ideas from debates within African-American criticism, queer theory and urban theory to support and reinforce my readings of the texts. Theoretical strands of thoughts within both postcolonial writing in a British context and feminism within an African-American context provide a productive conceptual framework through which to assess this area of literature.

⁴⁹ Irenosen Okojie, 'Black British Writers: we're more than just Zadie Smith and Monica Ali', *The Guardian*, 23 March 2014 [<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/23/black-british-writers-more-than-zadie-smith-monica-ali>]

Intersecting Debates around Gender and Race

Vron Ware's call for the establishment of a version of feminism which 'allow(s) opposition to one form of domination without being complicit in another' provides a productive lens through which to examine both feminist and race-related discourses' approaches to black British women's writing.⁵⁰ While race-related discourses remain insufficiently gendered, hegemonic feminism continues to grapple with the intersection of gender and race. There are a number of important debates within the fields of feminism, postcolonialism and African-American criticism which I wish to set-out.

For the most part, postcolonial theories, seem to me, to be more pertinent to Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's parents' generation than to their own and the challenge which I have faced in accommodating these writers within a pre-existing British critical space speaks to scholarly discourses' wider challenge in relating to a generation of writers born and raised in Britain to parents who originally migrated from somewhere else. I am however aware that Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*, which popularised representations of 'the other', bears pertinence to the dialogue around performances of gender in a black British context. Introducing the key concepts around Said's text assists in understanding the critical backdrop from which concerns expressed by black feminism have emerged. 'The Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West)', Said argues, 'as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience'.⁵¹ Since its publication in 1978, *Orientalism* has been upheld as a crucial text in shaping postcolonial and black British scholarship, but has been criticised by feminist thinkers for lacking representation of gender and for the fetishisation of the non-white female body. Despite its gendered limitations, Said's *Orientalism* and its identification of othering processes emerges as a useful foundational text for thinking about the ways that black women subjects are othered.

⁵⁰ Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale* (London: Verso, 1992), p.254

⁵¹ Said, 'Introduction' in *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), pp. 1-2

It strikes me that the phrase, 'double colonisation', is fundamental to a consideration of gender in a postcolonial context. Coined by Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anne Rutherford in the mid-1980s, the term, 'double-colonisation', has provided the framework through which postcolonialism has often engaged with gendered sensibilities. The notion of 'double colonisation' suggests that postcolonial women are doubly colonised, firstly by colonial regimes and secondly, by patriarchal systems, drawing a direct correlation between the colonial powers of Empire and the male powers of patriarchy.⁵² Postcolonialism's roots lie in setting out to challenge dominant power structures, opening-up a critical space in which alternative models of seeing and reading can be put forward. Based on such a definition, there are parallels to be drawn between its own fundamental agenda and that of feminism's. Nevertheless, I would argue that the aims of both areas of scholarship remain unfulfilled by their problematic approaches to gendered and racial sensitivities respectively.

In what was to become one of the most important postcolonial feminist texts, *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* gathered work by postcolonial feminist scholars into a 'solid literary community' to 'focus on the collective elements of women's experience'.⁵³ The editor of the anthology, Susheila Nasta, has repeatedly emphasised women writers' power to re-write dominant modes of thinking and seeing: 'language is both source and womb of creativity, a means of giving birth to new stories, new myths'.⁵⁴ Nasta's endorsement of writing as a tool to forcefully reject and redefine hegemonic literary or historic canons points to a long tradition in women's writing connected to women seeking legitimatisation and visibility through language. Nasta's message is an empowering one, but her introduction to the text also exposes the complications and contradictions faced by the postcolonial woman writer's potential to carve a discursive space for 'new stories' to be told in new ways:

⁵² Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford, *A Double Colonisation: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing* (Michigan: Dangaroo Press, 1986)

⁵³ Susheila Nasta, 'Introduction' in *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. xxviii

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. xviii

The post-colonial woman writer is not only involved in making herself heard, in changing the architecture of male-centred ideologies and languages, or in discovering new forms and language to express her experience, she has also to subvert and demythologise indigenous male writings and traditions which seek to label her. An entrapping cycle begins to emerge. In countries with a history of colonialism, women's quest for emancipation, self-identity and fulfilment can be seen to represent a traitorous act, a betrayal not simply of traditional codes of practice and belief but of the wider struggle for liberation and nationalism. Does to be 'feminist' therefore involve a further displacement or reflect an implicit adherence to another form of cultural imperialism?⁵⁵

Nasta's commentary is useful in establishing the 'entrapping cycle' of conforming to ways of thinking within feminist scholarship, capturing the quandary faced by scholarship's approach to black British women's writing in re-installing the systems of power it seeks to challenge. Most strikingly, her analysis of the postcolonial subject's caution of adopting feminist modes as another form of cultural oppression, undermines debates surrounding the 'feminism is for everybody' mantra.⁵⁶

There are numerous overlaps between the theory of 'double oppression', Nasta's 'cultural imperialism' and Kimberle Crenshaw's exploration of 'intersectionality', which engages with the correlating practices of systematic racism and sexism from an African-American perspective. Published in a law journal in the early 1990s, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality was quickly adopted by a range of academic disciplines as the theoretical model through which to address the relationship between gender and race. 'Intersectionality' explores the entangled practices of sexism and racism:

Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. xv

⁵⁶ See bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2000). The text demands that feminism rejects patriarchal, racist and homophobic systems and establishes a version of feminism which speaks to women from wide-ranging cultural, social and racial backgrounds.

as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling.⁵⁷

Crenshaw's theory of 'intersectionality' opens up a dialogue which challenges the rigidity of scholarly categories in an attempt to find a more porous space for attending to systems of racist and sexist practices simultaneously.

It is useful to note specific difficulties feminism has faced in integrating the dimension of race into its discourse. In this sense, the work of black feminism has sought to extend the discourse's focus. Audre Lorde's powerful statement summarises the backdrop from which black feminism's agenda emerged:

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But is it not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences between us that are separating us [...] and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behaviour and expectation.⁵⁸

Lorde's analysis emphasises feminism's 'refusal' to address and examine the social, cultural and racial variables which impact a woman subject's experience. I have repeatedly found myself leaning upon African-American critics such as Lorde to find an appropriate language to articulate critical interpretations of the work by Evans, Evaristo and Levy.

In what was to become a defining statement on black feminism, Hazel V. Carby's essay, 'White woman listen!' powerfully initiated the black woman's voice into twentieth-century feminist discourse. The opening lines of the essay expose not only the under-representation of black women's experiences, but the problematic ways in which the black woman subject is represented in opposition to the white woman as a 'Western' ideal:

⁵⁷ Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43:6 (1991), p. 1256

⁵⁸ Audre Lorde, 'Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference' in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), p. 114

The black women's critique of *history* has not only involved us in coming to terms with 'absences'; we have also been outraged by the ways in which it has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us. *History* has constructed our sexuality and our femininity as deviating from those qualities with which white women, as the prize objects of the Western world, have been endowed.⁵⁹

Carby's analysis points to patriarchal orders' upholding of both gendered and racial hierarchies in their treatment of women and 'white feminists' failure to perceive the entanglement of racism and sexism which contributes to the black woman subject's oppression. Carby asserts that it is only the work by black feminists which is able to recognise the simultaneous oppression formed by the 'interconnection of class, gender and race'.⁶⁰ While I remain uncomfortable with the idea of such a division within feminism, a movement supposedly founded upon equality and solidarity, Carby's commentary exposes an undeniable tendency within feminism to present the prototypical woman as white, educated and middle-class.

The most powerful sentiment expressed in Carby's essay derives from her suggestion that the operations of hegemonic feminism in fact re-enshrine the inequalities and power hierarchies which the movement endeavours to breakdown:

Both white feminist theory and practice have to recognize that white women stand in a power relation as oppressors of black women. This compromises any feminist theory and practice founded on the notion of simple equality.⁶¹

First published in 1982, Carby's critical voice on black feminism emerged alongside discourses of postcolonialism and at the beginning of third wave feminism which responded to perceived failures of the first and second waves. The arguments put forward by Carby in 'White woman listen!' challenge previous essentialist

⁵⁹ Hazel V. Carby, 'White woman listen!: Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood' in *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), p.68

⁶⁰ Carby, p.68

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.69

expressions of feminism which privileged the concerns and experiences of white middle-class women. Such a powerful critique of feminism's narrow parameters supported feminists' discarding of monolithic definitions of women's experience to negotiate a space in which the racial and social factors underpinning women's lives could be taken into consideration.

Published in 2017, Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, suggests that twenty-first century feminism continues to struggle to integrate racial subjectivities into its discourse. While I am sceptical of the title of Eddo-Lodge's book in its deliberately contentious perpetuation of divisions surrounding race, her assertions on contemporary issues facing black feminists are significant. Eddo-Lodge contextualises many of the issues presented by Carby's work within a British twenty-first century critical framework. Aside from the parallels between Carby's and Eddo-Lodge's titles and their direct appeal to white subjects to take responsibility for the marginalisation of black woman subjects, there are other parallels to be drawn between the works as examples of black feminist commentaries. Recalling her personal relationship to feminism as a black woman, Eddo-Lodge notes:

[...] something wasn't quite right. Feminism was helping me to become a more critical, confident woman, and in turn, it was helping me come to terms with my blackness – a part of myself that I'd always known was shrouded in stigma. I'd grown up with white friends who had assured me that they 'didn't see me as black', and that I 'wasn't like other black people'. [...] The feminist circles I'd thrown myself into were almost all white. This whiteness wasn't a problem if you didn't talk about race, but if you did, it would reveal itself as an exclusionary force.⁶²

Eddo-Lodge's sense of the stigmatisation around her blackness amongst her peers and in social circles connects with Levy's presentation of explicit racism masked as empathy in her protagonist's social circles. In a scene at school in *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, one of Angela's friends attempts to protect her from another child's

⁶² Reni Eddo-Lodge, 'The Feminism Question' in *Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Circus, 2017), pp.152-153

discriminatory slurs by claiming that Angela is 'not even proper coloured [...] it's just a suntan'.⁶³ Eddo-Lodge's statements are equally reminiscent of a scene in *Never Far from Nowhere* in which Vivien denies her Jamaican heritage to avoid the cultural and social connotations attached to her racial identity.⁶⁴ I offer an extended analysis of this scene in Chapter Three, but it is worth examining the simultaneous reassurance and comfort felt by both Vivien and Eddo-Lodge at their friends perceiving them as different from 'other black people'. The voices of Eddo-Lodge's friends symbolise, in her mind, hegemonic views towards race in which 'whiteness positions itself as the norm'.⁶⁵ The 'exclusionary forces' she refers to resonate with Carby's arguments on the contradictory nature of feminism which promotes itself as a movement around inclusiveness and equal rights access, and in reality, excludes and marginalises women who do not conform to particular models of being.

Eddo-Lodge directly addresses contemporary feminism's continued failure to acknowledge the inequalities, aside from sexism, entrenched in patriarchal power structures. She argues that:

If feminism can understand the patriarchy, it's important to question why so many feminists struggle to understand whiteness as a political structure in the very same way. [...] So much of politics is just middle-aged white men passing the ball to one another. Every so often, a white middle-aged woman is brought on board in an effort to diversify. The one thing that unites these differing political perspectives is their flat-out refusal to challenge a white consensus.⁶⁶

Eddo-Lodge's analysis proposes that white-centricity limits and controls women's opportunities in institutionalising certain hierarchies which preserve the image of the white, middle-class man at the centre of power. Eddo-Lodge appears to be arguing that patriarchal systems are propped up and preserved by a failure within feminism to confront the intersection of racism and sexism in power relations. In normalising 'whiteness' in such power systems, feminism undermines its very

⁶³ Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, p.144

⁶⁴ See Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.136

⁶⁵ Eddo-Lodge, p.169

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.168

agenda in achieving equality across the gendered, social, racial and cultural spectrum. While Eddo-Lodge's interpretation of contemporary feminism offers a bleak portrayal of any progress made since the publication of Carby's 'White woman listen!', her proactive text initiates important dialogues around the complexities and contradictions which inevitably shape feminist readings of black British women's writing. Aligning Eddo-Lodge's text with Carby's work also exemplifies the distance that feminism in Britain needs to travel to accommodate racialised and gendered subjectivities.

Similar issues arise in the treatment of black British women's writing in postcolonial and anti-racist discourses. African-American criticism again proves useful in contextualising this area of scholarship. bell hooks' *Killing Race: Ending Rage*, published in the mid-1990s, played a significant role in the exposure of hegemonic anti-racist discourse's inability to represent the concerns of black women. 'When race and racism are the topic in public discourse', hooks argues, 'the voices that speak are male'.⁶⁷ hooks' work points to the vexing reality for black women subjects who are simultaneously forced to occupy a marginal space in dominant discourses surrounding feminism and race-relations. hooks reveals discrepancies within anti-racist scholarship precisely because of the ways in which it omits the black woman subject:

[...] if I or any other black woman chooses to speak about race from a standpoint that includes feminism, we are seen as derailing the more important political discussion, not adding a necessary dimension. When this sexist silencing occurs, it usually happens with the tacit complicity of audiences who have over time learned to think always of race within blackness as a male thing and to assume that the real political leaders emerging from such public debates will always and only be male.⁶⁸

Eddo-Lodge's and hooks' assessments imply that systems of power within both race-related and gender-related discourses derive from patriarchal models and that

⁶⁷ bell hooks, 'Introduction: Race Talk' in *Killing Race: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), p.1

⁶⁸ hooks, p.2

progress for black women subjects is limited by a refusal of such structures to acknowledge the ways in which one is inevitably implicated in the other. An analysis of the issues surrounding both feminism and race-related scholarly discourses paradoxically solidifies the intersection of gender and race in demonstrating the ways in which a productive model for either cannot be established without one taking the other into account.

Judith Butler's feminist work is in dialogue with the arguments presented by black feminism. It would be reductive for any scholarly consideration of the successes and failures of contemporary feminism to not take into account the influence of Butler's work on gender constitution. While to some extent Butler's work embodies the version of feminism which both Carby and Eddo-Lodge critique, her work on the social and cultural conditioning of gender serves to emphasise the systematic control exercised over the protection of certain identity-categories. Butler suggests that gender is socially conditioned, rather than biologically determined. Similarly to Carby and Eddo-Lodge, Butler's work implies that the operations of social institutions and power structures perpetuate 'traditional' gender roles and the secondary position of women in different areas of society. Butler's reading of gender emphasises its instability and subsequent need to repeatedly perform and reiterate tropes of masculinity or femininity: 'the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*'.⁶⁹ Her argument assumes that if gender were fixed in biology then there would be no need to recurrently perform and re-perform versions of the gendered self, corroborating its instability, instead of its natural inevitability:

This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation [...] the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame [...] ⁷⁰

My own views on gender are aligned with Butler's suggestion that over time, continual performances of gender prompt social mores to fall into place. Gender is

⁶⁹ Butler, 'Subversive Bodily Acts' in *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.191

⁷⁰*Ibid*

repeated in so many ways, within different cultural contexts, that gender distinctions become normative, embedding themselves in the everyday functions which men and women engage with. At the same time, Butler's investigation into gender as socially constituted proposes a new strategy for confronting the social, political and cultural implications of repeated performances. Her discussion of the deployment of terms around identity-categories facilitates a space for re-appropriating ideas around gender and race:

[...] the argument that the category of "sex" is the instrument or effect of "sexism" or its interpellating moment, that "race" is the instrument and effect of "racism" [...] does *not* entail that we ought never make use of such terms, as if such terms could only and always reconsolidate the oppressive regimes of power by which they are spawned. On the contrary, precisely because such terms have been produced and constrained within such regimes, they ought to be repeated in directions that reverse and displace their originating aims.⁷¹

Butler's hypothesis encapsulates the tension between identity-bearing politics and an urge to reconfigure representations of women in relation to homogenous constructions of gender and race. The analysis establishes the need to reclaim gendered and racial labels in a productive way which detaches the very terms from the 'oppressive regimes' from which they derive. For example, repositioning gender outside of the heteronormative and patriarchal parameters which it has traditionally been read and recognised within, offers subversive and empowering possibilities. The proposal reinforces this thesis' aim to appropriate the terms 'black' and 'woman' according to new critical paradigms.

'Black British Women Writers': Mapping the Terms

Any project of this scope is inevitably confronted by numerous challenges and tensions. In connection to the concerns that I have raised over the tendency to read

⁷¹ Butler, 'Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion' in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p.81

black British women's writing as autobiographical, the title of this thesis might perhaps be perceived as contradictory, given its use of the terms 'black' and 'women'. Arguably, the thesis thus participates in safeguarding constraining categories that have pigeonholed black British writers over the past three decades. The language quandary with regards to how we productively critique this area of British literature without solely focusing on the racial and gendered identity of the author remains unresolved. Nevertheless, in positioning the selected novels along a trajectory of contemporary British literature and London writing, I hope to offer new insights into critical discourses through the terms, 'woman' and 'black', can be claimed productively.

This group of writers' work exemplifies the ways in which 'blackness' in a British context carries cultural *and* political connotation. When I refer to 'race', as I repeatedly do, in the body of this thesis, I am more often than not deploying the term interchangeably with ideas around 'blackness'. As a discursive category, the term 'blackness' is one that we are yet to establish a productive scholarly and critical framework around in a British context and my tentativeness in exploring ideas of blackness in relation to the novels' representation of racial identities reflects a wider collective challenge around precisely *how* we address ideas of race in scholarly, educational and cultural contexts. The subject-material's connection to ideas around de-colonising the canon/curriculum, accessibility and equalities raise more profound questions concerning representation and who's lives matter. I am committed to disseminating research on this work as part of a wider endeavour to extend and develop scholarship's engagement with race and explorations of 'blackness' and 'whiteness'. The tension between the activism attached to this area of literature and the academic and scholarly discourses that surround it remains an unresolved tension. At the same time, my decision to often deploy the term 'race' in place of 'blackness', conveys, as Nicole King highlights in her work on teaching African-American literature in the classroom, a failure on our part as scholars to find

an appropriate language and syntax through which to address notions of blackness.⁷²

Considering the use 'black British' and 'women' in my title, I equally think that it is important to contextualise what I mean by the terms and address some of the critical and discursive issues surrounding the categorisation of this literature. Mike Phillips encapsulates the ways in which critiques of black British writing prioritise the identity of the author over their actual writing, arguing that 'my identity as a writer was perpetually under attack': 'Our work is labelled as 'black British', not because of its content, or style, or mood or tone or because it has a British landscape or says anything about Britain, but because the author has a dark skin and conveniently happened to spend some time in this country'.⁷³ Phillips' frustrations over academic and journalistic commentaries' emphasis on the gendered and racial identities of authors are shared by Tankika Gupta. The former playwright-in-residence at The National Theatre, has noted, 'I was once called 'the Asian woman Bengali writer' I thought, why not just call me a writer?'⁷⁴ Gupta publicly denounces the gendered and racial 'othering' which black and Asian women writers are exposed to and her approach is one I share. While I remain uncomfortable with the terms 'black', 'British' and 'women' as a means of identifying these writers, I intend to counter the use of such terms by challenging homogenous readings of this writing through emphasising the precise urban locatedness of these novels and their presentation of dynamic twenty-first century London identities.

The grammar used in the deployment of such terms is equally important. Throughout this thesis, the term 'black' is deliberately presented with a lowercase 'b'. Within an African-American context, commentators have noted that such a use of the lowercase 'b' participates in complicating proper identifiers for black Americans. In a persuasive piece published in *The New York Times*, Lori L Tharps

⁷² Nicole King, 'Getting in Conversation: Teaching African American Literature and Training Critical Thinkers' in Ben Knights, ed. *Teaching Literature: Text and Dialogue in the English Classroom*, (Ed.) Ben Knights (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp. 81-98

⁷³ Mike Phillips, 'Foreword: Migration, Modernity and English Writing' in *A Black British Canon*, (Ed.) Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.14

⁷⁴ Laura Barnett, 'Portrait of the artist: Tanika Gupta, playwright', *The Guardian*, 14 February 2011 [<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/feb/14/tanika-gupta-playwright>]

argues the case for a capitalised 'B', stating that: 'When speaking of a culture, ethnicity or group of people, the name should be capitalized. Black with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase black is simply a color'.⁷⁵ I support Tharp's claim for deploying the capitalised 'B' as a memorialisation of the troubled history of slavery. In this sense, the capitalised 'Black' serves to remind the nation of the horrendous circumstances under which African diasporic subjects first arrived in the United States, subjected to forced labour in slave plantations.

By the same token, I would argue that the capitalisation of the 'B' in 'Black' in African-American discourse is unique and differs from the black British context. Firstly, many black Britons would not identify with an African diaspora in the same way, precisely because of Britain's different colonial history. As previously mentioned, post-war migration to London saw ex-colonial subjects from primarily Jamaica and Trinidad, and later other Caribbean islands, settle in Britain and establish a Caribbean diaspora here. I would suggest that this generation of men and women defined themselves as Caribbean and while their wider connection to the transatlantic slave trade is clearly pertinent, their trajectories differ from those of African-American subjects. Secondly, Tharp's rationalisation for the use of a capitalised 'B' would in turn warrant a capitalised 'White' to denote a historical European diaspora. The notion of capitalising one race and not the other is an uneasy one in its potential to perpetuate pre-existing racial hierarchies which I consider unproductive. While the capitalisation of a subject's nationality is consistent with nations being proper nouns, the capitalisation of a subject's race is at odds with the grammar of other determining adjectives used to describe a subject. For example, the terms 'woman', 'man', 'young', 'old', 'heterosexual', or 'gay', would in most cases be presented in the lowercase. In using the word 'black' with a lowercase 'b' as an adjective, I wish to detach the term from a sense of nationhood to support this thesis' agenda to forge a space to think more fluidly about race and gender as definitions of being. The lowercase 'black' assists in derailing the incessant labelling of this group of writers according to what has taken place before, forging a space for new definitions of the twenty-first century Londoner to emerge.

⁷⁵ Lori L. Tharps, 'The Case for Black with a Capital B', *The New York Times*, 18 November 2014 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html>]

The discursive treatment of ideas around nationhood equally raises the question of my deployment of the term 'British' over 'English', which reflects a wider preference to align the thesis with ideas of 'Britishness' over 'Englishness'. While my focus is in fact on a sense of 'London-ness' as a source of belonging, I am inclined, at times when nationhood is considered, to deploy the term, 'Britishness'. My rationale for doing so derives from the politics of national identity attached to notions of 'Englishness'. There is, or was, a sense of cohesion underlying British connections to the union within the United Kingdom and more widely, the European community. This sense of unity is in opposition to a culture of 'Englishness' which has, in recent years, been used as ammunition within far-right politics to justify anti-immigration policies and Euroscepticism.⁷⁶

The deployment of the term 'British' to refer to this group of writers is also consistent with the views on nationhood presented by their novels. Levy's early novels exemplify the negative connotations often attached to constructions of 'Englishness'. For Vivien in *Never Far From Nowhere*, 'Englishness' denotes 'whiteness' and her Jamaican heritage becomes a source of anxiety: 'I knew that English people hated us'.⁷⁷ The didacticism found in Levy's early novels is certainly more tangible than in some of the other works explored in this thesis and both novels address embedded institutionalised racism in 'English' society: 'People not wanting to give you jobs if you from Jamaica'.⁷⁸ To avoid engaging with such politics of nationhood, the thesis only deliberately deploys the term 'English' on occasions to reinforce a specific novel's use of the term.

Thomas Glave's introduction to *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* proposes strategies for disrupting the politics attached to the use of certain terms. His work has proved invaluable in assisting me formulate my own ideas around the re-appropriation of the category labels that I wish to

⁷⁶ See Richard Hayton, 'The UK Independence Party and the Politics of Englishness', *Political Studies Review*, 14:3, (2016) pp.400-410

[<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1478929916649612>]

⁷⁷ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.5

⁷⁸ Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, p.126

critique. The title of Glave's work, like mine, deploys the terms by which the writers he engages with have so often been stigmatised and limited. Glave's upfront approach to this contradiction is one that I fully endorse:

Language itself posed one of the most vexing questions at the center of this project's development, principally in the consideration of a title [...] What words could evoke and if possible, encapsulate the nuances, complexities, and powers of these gathered works?⁷⁹

Glave's commentary points to the politics of language, most notably, the language used to define a group of writers which resists homogenising the nuanced and complex distinctions which their writing presents. His comments point to my own difficulties in grappling with the appropriate labels to apply to Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's writing, in its potential to overlook the subtleties of their work outside of the 'black British women' paradigm. Glave refuses to accept divisions brought about by the use of the terms 'lesbian' and 'gay', instead approaching the labels as a means of forging connections across difference. The repeated use of the collective 'our', for example: 'our Antilles' and 'our many Caribbeans', reinforces the 'gathering' of different voices across cultural, gendered and racial boundaries which his text undertakes.⁸⁰ Glave's strategy of overcoming the tensions surrounding identity labels is to re-inflect the ways in which the terms we deploy are interpreted:

[...] this collection's title remains partly vexing for its use of words *lesbian* and *gay* – for what exactly, I wondered along the way and wonder even more today, is – can be – 'lesbian and gay writing' [...] Yet, this frustrating fact has a potentially productive conflict at its center and can make possible for all of us new, greatly unsettling journeys.⁸¹

His comments speak to my urge to create a space in which the terms 'women' and 'black' can be defined in more productive ways. The 'great unsettling journey' which Glave refers to serves to emphasise the re-mapping of London through these writers'

⁷⁹ Thomas Glave, 'Introduction: Desire through the Archipelago' in *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p.7

⁸⁰ Glave, p.3

⁸¹ *Ibid*, pp.8-9

novels which this project sets out to trace. While the words, 'black', 'woman' and 'British' fail to capture the complexities, nuances and contradictions inherent to the presentation of London that these novels evoke, they support the project's representation of the city from an alternative perspective to that of which has traditionally been explored by white male subjects.

Mapping the Thesis

In the chapters which follow, I read the selected novels introduced above according to different thematic paradigms. Chapter Two offers a comparative analysis of the performance of gender in public places, as represented by *26a*, and domestic spaces, as represented by *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, *26a* and *Mr Loverman*, to query the impact place has upon the performance and interpretation of gender. Chapter Three explores discourses on 'passing' within a British literary context through an exploration of Vivien's performances of racial and social passing in *Never Far from Nowhere* and Barrington's sexual passing in *Mr Loverman*. Finally, Chapter Four considers definitions of 'home' in Evans' *26a* and Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* to explore psychological and emotional implications of 'feeling at home' in the city and the novels' depiction of a 'London-centric' construction of belonging.

Chapter Two

Gendered Performance in London Spaces:**An Antithetical Exploration of Public Places and the Domestic Realm**

Within the selected novels, an underlying tension exists between the domestic world and the opportunities and challenges presented by everyday London life. This chapter presents a comparative analysis of the performance of gender in public places and domestic spaces to query the impact place has upon the performance and interpretation of gender. Through applying strands of thought from feminist theory to the selected extracts from Evans, Evaristo and Levy's novels, I propose gender as a dynamic, mouldable identity, one which adapts and changes according to the particular social setting in which it is being performed.

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first section offers a literary exploration of Soho, a distinctive London area, to think about the performance of gender in bustling London spaces. Engaging with historical representations of Soho as a site of liberation and openness provides a lens through which to assess the role of gender in the shaping of individual experience in public places. A close analysis of an extract from Evans' *26a*, in which one of the twin protagonists, Bessi, is working in a late-night Soho bar, exposes the disparity between gendered embodiment and performance.

In the second part of the chapter, I engage with representations of mothers in domestic spaces in Evans' *26a*, Evaristo's *Mr Loverman* and Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'*. I am interested in scrutinising the tension between a feminist agenda in resisting upholding representations of maternal and domestic roles and women writers' portrayals of mother characters most 'at home' in domestic spaces.

Women as Embodied Subjects in Public and Private Spaces

*She walked, with a bounce and a tray,
up and down the metallic aisle,
preferring to think of it as
a catwalk (or something).*⁸²

Within the selected novels, an underlying tension exists between the domestic world and the opportunities and challenges presented by everyday London life. Evans' *26a*, Evaristo's *Mr Loverman*, and Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* reveal the spatial, social and cultural factors which contribute to a performance of self in complex urban environments such as London, where multiple influences, identities and traditions readily intersect. Performances of gender are most clearly understood by a comparative analysis of the spaces in which they are performed. The selected novels identify the ways in which certain public London spaces demand performances of gender which perpetuate problematic perceptions of women as embodied subjects. Dismantling constructions of the domestic home as a haven away from the city, *26a*, *Mr Loverman*, and *Every Light in the House Burnin'* equally display other forms of gendered power systems prevailing in private London spaces. According to Susan Bordo, the body can be understood as a metaphor for culture: 'The body – what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body – is a medium of culture'.⁸³ Bordo's analysis provides a framework through which to read the selected novels' presentation of the gendered body as a cultural signifier. The novels' agendas are shared in exposing the difficulties faced by women subjects in constructing a selfhood which is not conditioned by dominant cultural, social and political modes of thinking and seeing gender.

Representations of embodiment and its relationship to the performance of gender has long been a site of contestation and debate for feminist scholars. Feminist thinkers continue to connect discourses around body politics and its relationship to women's autonomy as central to feminism. As Elizabeth Grosz makes clear, 'if

⁸² Evans, *26a*, pp.159-160

⁸³ Susan R. Bordo, 'Part 1: The Body and the Self' in *The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p.13

women are to be granted a position congruous with but independent of men, the female body must be capable of autonomous representation'.⁸⁴ Such constructions of the woman subject's body are tied to wider debates around the politics and aesthetics of artistic representation. Underpinned by ideology, politics and culture, artistic depictions of the gendered body perpetually reproduce and reinforce patriarchal notions of the female. As John Berger observes in his influential text, *Ways of Seeing*, 'women are depicted in quite a different way from men – not because the feminine is different from the masculine - but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him'.⁸⁵ Artistic readings of the physical female form extend to wider society, representing the gendered dynamics entrenched in our interpretations of what we see: 'The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe'.⁸⁶ The 'ideal spectator's' gaze is conditioned by patriarchal projections onto the female body. Both Berger's and Grosz' positions foreground the difficulties of looking upon the woman subject's body innocently – discursively, we struggle to perceive women's bodies independently or detached from hegemonic paradigms of femininity. Simone De Beauvoir asserts that 'humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being'.⁸⁷ I wish to engage feminist perspectives to further explore expectations imposed upon the woman subject's body to initiate a dialogue around the limitations of gendered embodiment under the scrutiny of an objectifying gaze.

The chapter engages with the antithetical presentation of public and private realms, as presented by the selected novels. The chapter divides into two parts: the first section calibrates a gendered map of Soho through a close analysis of an extract from *26a* to understand the spatial relationship between women's bodies and public London spaces; the second part of the chapter steers the focus into domestic spaces to engage with the long tradition of representing home in women's writing and to think about the specific ways in which Evans, Evaristo and Levy reimagine the

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, 'Bodies and Knowledge' in *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.32

⁸⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p.64

⁸⁶ Berger, p.8

⁸⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, 'Introduction: Woman as Other' in *The Second Sex*, (Trans.) Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2009), p.26

domestic space. The discussion focuses on the representation of mother characters in Evans' *26a*, Evaristo's *Mr Loverman* and Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* to assess the authors' gendered mapping of domestic spaces.

A Gendered Mapping of Soho: W1F and W1G

In this next section, I consider a re-presentation of Soho to connect to the thesis' wider exploration of the contrasting ways in which men and women occupy public space. Contributing to commentaries on the tension underpinning 'place versus space' in its shaping of women's experience in London, I offer a locally sensitive, gendered reading of an extract from Evans' *26a*, set in Soho.

Soho has long been considered a site synonymous with sexual and cultural liberation. This prime central-west London location has historically resisted conforming to normative trends or behaviour. As an area that prides itself on being cosmopolitan, Soho has morphed towards a mode of bohemianism – a slightly outré and alternative destination. Today, its residents continue to campaign against proposed plans for redevelopment and gentrification. As journalist Carl Court recognises, redevelopment plans in the area have been greeted by 'a lament for the death of bohemian London'.⁸⁸ Judith R. Walkowitz's study, *Nights Out: Life in Contemporary London* elaborates on the unique spirit and character of this London area: 'Soho has long been a storied place. One legend credits Soho with a timeless essence and effortless capacity to sustain a traditional culture of nonconforming for over three hundred years'.⁸⁹ A sketch of contemporary Soho demonstrates the endurance of this 'essence', exuding in amongst others, the eccentric Greek Street café, Maison Bertaux, the nostalgic Old Compton street delicatessen, I Camisa & Son, the few-remaining retro record stores surrounding Berwick Street Market and the conspicuous sex shops on Brewer Street, which remain in the neighbourhood today.

⁸⁸ Carl Court/Getty Images, 'Saving Soho: the 'spirit of London' captured for posterity – in pictures', *The Guardian*, 6 February 2015
[<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/gallery/2015/feb/06/saving-soho-photographs-in-pictures>]

⁸⁹ Judith R. Walkowitz, 'Epilogue' in *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (London: Yale University Press, 2012), p.286

This 'urban village' continues to promote itself as a dynamic, open and liberal pocket of contemporary London.⁹⁰

Soho's mood is engendered by the physical patterns of its streets. The narrow, winding streets (exemplified by mews like Meard Street, off Dean Street) do not naturally permit light to enter, cultivating a liminal, or sinister atmosphere, depending on a subject's engagement with the place. Ensuring the longevity of Soho's distinctive character relies upon recognising the direct correlation between Soho's geography and the industries which have traditionally thrived in the area, imbuing the buildings with certain functions and identities which reinforce the atmosphere of the place. Walker's Court, a narrow, cobbled alley which connects Peter Street and Berwick Street has long been a home to sex book shops, strip clubs and brothels. While the street is now under a major redevelopment scheme, I struggle to gauge how such gentrification plans propose to detach the alley as a dark, mysterious physical space from its long history of sexual conduct and transgression. Also known as 'Tin Pan Alley', Denmark Street has long been a focal point for British music – the numerous guitar shops and recording studios there drawing musicians from around the globe. A lengthy battle between Westminster Council, who submitted plans to close some of the independent music shops on the street for residential development, and local residents and businesses, culminated with the street being awarded a 'Blue Plaque' from the British Plaque Trust to mark its musical legacy, memorialise its rich history and discourage redevelopment which relegates it as a nostalgic heritage site and a meeting-place for subjects in search of entertainment, bohemianism and hedonism.⁹¹

The geography of the buildings lends itself to creating small intimate spaces in which opportunities for transgression and transience are made available. 'Affect Theory' provides a productive lens for interpreting the atmosphere cultivated by such spatial patterns. 'Affect' is a difficult concept to pin down and define, referring, as it does, to the ephemeral traces that constitute the atmosphere in any particular

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p.298

⁹¹ Recent photos of some of the places discussed here can be found in Carl Court/Getty Images cited above.

encounter, at any given moment. In their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth define affect as ‘resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds’.⁹² Their introduction argues that the very difficulty of defining and pinning down ‘affect’ is central to its resonance as an interpretive tool:

There is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be. If anything, it is more tempting to imagine that there can only ever be infinitely multiple iterations of affect and theories of affect: theories as diverse and singularly delineated as their own highly particular encounters with bodies, affect, worlds.⁹³

This analysis captures the intangibility of ‘affect’ in relation to rationalising the ways in which it impacts different ‘bodies’ and ‘worlds’, as they occupy different spaces, but equally points to the subtle ‘force-relations’ and energy which circulate in a place such as Soho. Lauren Berlant’s work is useful in clarifying the point here; she argues that, ‘when we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us. This cluster of promises could be embedded in a person, a thing, an institution [...]’.⁹⁴ Berlant’s comments resonate with the potential, or ‘promise’, of transgression symbolised by the map of Soho. Put simply, I am suggesting that embedded within Soho’s infrastructure is a ‘cluster of promises’ that render the area mysterious, transgressive and curious. Deep-rooted within the streets of Soho are aspirations of divergence and non-conformity that are inherent to the area’s sense of self and have been produced by the varied ‘iterations’ of ‘selves’ that have moved through and used the area in such diverse ways.

⁹² Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, ‘Introduction: An Inventory of Shimmers’ in *The Affect Reader*, (Eds.) Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p.1

⁹³ *Ibid*, pp.3-4

⁹⁴ Lauren Berlant, ‘Cruel Optimism’ in *The Affect Theory Reader*, p. 93

The opening to the selected extract from *26a* maps this vision of Soho, and Bessi's navigation of it. Within the scene, Bessi is working as a waitress in a bustling, late-night Soho bar called 'Digger's':

Digger's of Soho was next door to a club called Spicey Riley's. Between the early morning hours of three and six, steamy clubbers staggered out of Spicey Riley's and into Digger's for chips, club sandwiches, pizzas and tortilla wraps, which were Digger's speciality. Many of them were still hallucinating, tripping along roads of ecstasy or acid. There were nights when someone might jump up on to their chair, in sequins and a belly top, and start shouting at the dancing video screens along the wall above them.⁹⁵

The extract's presentation of Soho's night world epitomises the hedonistic lifestyle which is embedded in the area. Bessi's observation of customers' performing spontaneous acts triggered by taking 'ecstasy or acid' captures a particular narcotic trend in the 1980s which belongs to a much longer history of drug-taking as part of a wider culture of pleasure-seeking in Soho. The 'sequins' and 'belly top' worn by the aforementioned customer captures the eccentricity that is inherent to Soho's appeal as an alternative destination. Most notably, the matter of fact way in which Bessi recalls these nights, as well as the repetition of the routine of club-dwellers 'stagger[ing]' into Digger's, demonstrates Soho's acceptance, and indeed, encouragement of eccentric and non-normative modes of behaviour and being.

The communities assembled in Soho have worked hard to retain a sense of individuality in light of the changing patterns of London life and commerce in recent years. The sheer number of independent, privately-owned retailers, restaurants and cafes that survive in Soho in the contemporary city attests to the residents' activism when it comes to protecting Soho's sense of locality. Within an increasingly globalised world, the tension between representations of 'the local' versus homogenised urban experiences across cities and continents is becoming increasingly prominent. It is useful to introduce feminist urban theorist, Doreen Massey's work on the relationship between space and place to further understand

⁹⁵ Evans, *26a*, p.159

Soho's fight to retain its individuality. She queries, 'how, in the face of all this movement and intermixing, can we retain any sense of a local place and its particularity?'⁹⁶ Within London, where redevelopment and gentrification initiatives are being implemented across the city, the gentrification process threatens the authentic 'feel' of particular neighborhoods, instead cultivating a homogenous sense of the 'local'. Massey's arguments reinforce the contemporary quandary of globalised constructions of the notion of 'local':

In an era when, it is argued, 'local communities' seem to be increasingly broken up, when you can go abroad and find the same shops, the same music as at home, or eat your favourite foreign-holiday food at a restaurant down the road - and when everyone has a different experience of all this - how then do we think about 'locality'?⁹⁷

In reaction to these developments, communities in London are making efforts to preserve the cultural distinctiveness of their particular area. One of the most influential pretexts to Soho's enduring sense of self derives from its close affiliation with London's LGBT community.

Widely perceived as the 'historic centre of gay life' in London, Soho resonates profoundly with the LGBT community.⁹⁸ David Halperin's definition of queer as 'whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' assists in an imagining of Soho as an idiosyncratic alternative to heteronormative modes of living in London.⁹⁹ Equally, Walkowitz's historical excavation of this London area reinforces Soho's intimate relationship with London's gay community:

By 1994, the Village Group, an association of local gay businesses, began to advertise Soho as Europe's top gay village. Initially, some members of the Soho Society tended to dismiss Soho's queer popularity as transient,

⁹⁶ Doreen Massey, 'A Global Sense of Place' in *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994), p.1

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p.4

⁹⁸ James Penney, 'Currents of Queer' in *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), p.11

⁹⁹ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 62

believing that gay men would move on “and others will arrive in their place.” But the Society soon welcomed gay men and lesbians as part of Soho’s multicultural mix and viewed them as an acceptable face of sexual Soho. In 1999, after a horrific nail bombing attack on the Admiral Duncan, a gay pub in Old Compton Street, the *Soho Clarion* took the occasion to reflect on the bomber’s “hatred of those who are in any sense identifiably different.” In Soho, where being ‘different’ has been the norm since the 18th century, the bomber did not produce the effect he intended.¹⁰⁰

Soho’s ‘multicultural mix’, as Walkowitz’ articulates it, orientates around a sense of acceptance, accommodating and embracing those who might in other locations be deemed ‘other’. Gay men are at the heart of Soho’s identity. The homophobic attack on the Admiral Duncan, tragically killing three young people, including a pregnant woman, and wounding around seventy more, was devastating for the area. Simultaneously, the events of April 1999 forged a sense of solidarity and resilience amongst members of the community against prejudicial hatred, enshrining Soho’s collective commitment to encompassing non-heteronormative social conventions.

In many ways, Soho represents a refuge for the ‘outsider’. Yet, in spite of Soho’s openly liberal, welcoming face, the area has forged social spaces that are occupied in contrasting ways by men and women. Soho embodies a space in which transactional aspects of sex and the commodification of the human body are pervasive. Walkowitz highlights Soho’s emergence as a ‘sophisticated commercial venue’ in the twentieth century, serving ‘as a strategic location for the brokering of transactional goods and bodily display’.¹⁰¹ While queer theorists recognise Soho as a ‘a center of gay consumption’, a consideration of the mobilisation of women in this environment opens up a new dialogue.¹⁰² The extent to which women can be active players in the consumption of Soho as a ‘sophisticated commercial venue’ is dictated by particular social factors. Massey’s exploration of gendered space informs my discussion of Bessie’s experience in Soho:

¹⁰⁰ Walkowitz, p. 302

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p.286

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p.302

Survey after survey has shown how women's mobility, for instance, is restricted - in a thousand different ways, from physical violence to being ogled at or made to feel quite simply 'out of place' - not by 'capital', but by men.¹⁰³

The plurality of cultures embedded in Soho life renders it a space that is defined in starkly different ways for men and women. Evans' representation of Soho exemplifies, as Massey points out, that there is no 'single sense of place'; it simply does not exist.¹⁰⁴ Place, like affect, is built from an individual's relationship to the space around them; the 'multiple iterations' that Gregg and Seigworth refer to that denote the ways in which articulations of self, projected onto a specific landscape, contribute to definitions of place.¹⁰⁵ The indefinability of affect reinforces the transience and fleetingness inherent in a space like Soho, emerging as a resonant and suggestive way of thinking about a space like Soho as different and fleeting according to who is occupying it. Affect Theory provides a useful way for thinking about a rapidly changing urban environment such as Soho and the non-normative intimacies it encompasses. This idea is corroborated by Massey's challenge to the concept of a communal or 'coherent' definition of place, which implies that Soho's hegemonic self, orientating around predominately male experiences of the place, is undermined by other gendered experiences of it. In this sense, the area could well be diagnosed with split personalities in its contrasting interactions with men and women.

Female Embodiment in Public London Spaces

To further understand the specific ways in which a prevailing sense of place is challenged by performances of versions of gender in spaces, it is important to first define what I mean by the term 'gendered performance'.

¹⁰³ Massey, p.2

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p.7

¹⁰⁵ Gregg and Seigworth, p.4

It would be impossible to understand more about notions of the performance of gender without an engagement with influential feminist scholar, Judith Butler. Butler's theory on 'Gender Constitution' encourages us to 'consider gender [...] as a corporeal style, an "act," as it were, which is both intentional and performative'.¹⁰⁶ In evaluating the distinctions between sex and gender, Butler suggests that gender is, in its simplest form, a social performance. Butler's ideas are exemplified by a scene in *26a* which introduces Bessi's ability to perform a sensualised version of her gender when her twin sister, Georgia, notes: 'Bessi looks sexy, crossing her legs like that. She looks confident. How does she do that?'¹⁰⁷ In spite of the reader's understanding of Bessi's adolescent insecurities about her body, her sister's observation notes her capacity to channel a sexualised persona and perform a certain role.

For Butler, body is an 'active process', living and dynamic, its 'character as performative resides in the possibility of contesting the reified status'.¹⁰⁸ Butler's work on the processes 'by which a subject becomes socially constituted' shines light on the cultural, spatial and temporal ways in which gender is constructed and performed.¹⁰⁹ Butler's theory focuses on the 'relation between culture and nature' in the materialisation of the body, querying the extent to which performances of gender are a manifestation of 'sex' to 'draw the line between what is and what is not constructed'¹¹⁰:

[...] "sex" not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs [...] Thus, "sex" is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, "sex" is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple face or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize "sex"

¹⁰⁶ Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40:4 (1988), p.521

¹⁰⁷ Evans, *26a*, p.121

¹⁰⁸ Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', pp. 520-521

¹⁰⁹ Butler, 'Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion', p.81

¹¹⁰ Butler, 'Introduction' in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, p.xx

and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms.¹¹¹

Butler's use of language here further supports her reading of the body as a product of the gendered and social structure from which it emerges. The scientific tone of her discussion of gender as a 'process' and 'highly-regulated practice' highlights society's engineering of constructions of gender, situating it as part of a wider patriarchal machine. The use of terms such as 'governs', 'controls' and 'highly regulated' in relation to the production of the woman's body emphasises the power and patriarchy implicit in the ways in which gender is viewed and understood. This reading is further corroborated by Butler's discussion of the grammatical politics of approaches to gender in which she suggests that:

[...] it is unclear that there can be an "I" or a "we" who has not been submitted, subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being. Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the "I" neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves.¹¹²

Butler's suspicion of the grammar attached to the discussion and presentation of gender further reinforces the pervasive control of performances of gender. The suggestion of the impossibility of a subject coming 'into being' in a way which escapes being 'submitted, subjected to gender', namely the social connotations attached to notions of gender, emphasises the lack of individual autonomy over the body. Butler's theory on gender constitution omits the biologically determined qualities of a subject's sex to privilege a reading of gender which exposes the 'matrix' of gender politics. Bessi's performance in Soho and her audience's reception to it can be read as a manifestation of the processes involved in 'gendering' in public spaces.

An earlier scene in the novel lays the groundwork for an examination of the male gaze's assessment of Bessi's body. The twins' first boyfriends 'spotted' the sisters

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p.xii

¹¹² *Ibid*, p.xvi

from 'the top deck of a double-decker 182': 'The twins didn't know it, but Dean and Errol were lords of the double-deckers and their sport was to sit on the back seat and hunt'.¹¹³ The gendered hierarchy implied in the description of Dean and Errol as 'lords' is further emphasised by Evans' use of language associated with the natural world to present the boys as hunters and the sisters as prey: 'Their eyes were quick. In that one gusty sweep of top-deck travel they worked like radars through the milling crowds, separating the dogs from the babes'.¹¹⁴ While the boys' pursuits appear playful and innocent, Evans' treatment of their strategies to hunt 'virgins' from the top deck of the bus establishes a problematic gazing upon the gendered body which culminates in the scene in Soho.

Bessi works night shifts at Digger's in the hope of being 'spotted' by a music agent and assumes a stereotypically 'feminine' role to exploit potential opportunities to work in the industry. In Digger's, the spaces through which Bessi moves, the connections she forms with other people in the vicinity and the sensualised nature of her performance are explicitly 'womanly'. Bessi's performative act simultaneously reinforces and challenges Butler's theory. The act conveys the productive and problematic implications of producing gendered identities through the body. While Bessi appears to have command over her body and the ways in which it is acknowledged by the people around her, the act reveals, to deploy Butler's term, the 'ritualised form' of performing gender. Bessi's presentation of an overtly sexualised womanly self encapsulates the need to reiterate a version of gender as a survival strategy within certain environments. The extract represents a particular moment in the text that calibrates complex images of the female body in the novel as a whole. Evans' depiction is ambivalent, conveying the impossible contradictions inherent to an embodied gendered self.

Performing Gender in Soho

¹¹³ Evans, *26a*, p.112

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*

This section offers a close analysis of the second part of the selected extract from *26a* in which Bessi strategically performs gender to invite the male gaze, to understand the spatial relationship between the woman subject's body and Soho spaces. I apply theories on gendered enactment and embodiment from feminist discourse to consider the politics of space in Soho. Bessi's performance represents a moment within the novel when she explicitly deploys culturally recognised forms of her gendered, racial and sexual identities in the hope of being 'spotted' and pursuing her ambition of 'making records (or something that involved travelling a lot and eating out a lot and wearing super dishy clothes)'.¹¹⁵

Soho provides an intensified arena in which to gaze upon and assess the woman subject's body. Evans' account of the Soho scene conveys the precariousness of openly gendered acts in London spaces:

By the time the Spicey Riley's influx started, Bessi was sleepy. An important part of her did not yet understand this business of being awake all night. This part of her fantasised about sumptuous duvets and the loft in lamplight. Yet the other part of her, what wanted desperately *not* to be serving chips and espressos in a Digger's apron in the middle of the night [...] but to be making records (or something that involved travelling a lot and eating out a lot and wearing super dishy clothes) [...] And Bessie had heard from Digger himself, the man in the T-Shirt with 'Digger' on the front who spent a lot of time sitting down, that Spicey Riley's was frequented by certain members of the music industry.

She walked, with a bounce and a tray, up and down the metallic aisle, preferring to think of it as a catwalk (or something). When the customers waved or shouted or pointed for more this or more that she responded with dazzle as late as 5 a.m. She kept an eye on the door for the spotter. Early in her third month there, a man with big shoulders and a shimmering turquoise shirt had walked in with two glamorous looking women. As Bessi took their order, smiling brilliantly, she noticed the man studying her and she was convinced it was him (spotters were usually hims, she assumed). She waltzed off and told the cook to hurry and the barman to hurry, and as she sped back with the tray she felt the spotter's

¹¹⁵ Evans, *26a*, p. 159

eyes, all over her, measuring, imagining. Can't you see me? Bessi said with her hips, with her teeth. Can't you see me up there, like Mary J. Blige?

The spotter paid the bill. As Bessi leaned in to take the money, the man put his hand on her waist and whispered in her ear.

'What?' Bessie shouted. 'I didn't hear. What?'

The man moved his hand down over her hip, which Bessi was not at all sure about. 'I *said*,' he drawled, 'do you wanna come back with us, my beauty?'

Oh. It's not him, thought Bessi.

She stood up, snatched away the money and said, 'No thank *you*.'

[...]

Georgia told her to be careful of men like that. 'Don't go home in the morning until it's light,' she said. 'Why don't you work in the day instead?'

'They're not open during the day.'

'I mean work somewhere that is.'

'Oh *no*, Georgia! The whole *point* is that people get spotted more often in the night, in clubs and bars and stuff. So it's better. You have to make sacrifices if you want to conquer the world, you know.'

Georgia grunted. Conquering the world was ridiculous.¹¹⁶

Situated in London's West-End, the historical theatre district in London, Soho's passion for performance is embedded in its culture. Evans' taps into the language of theatricality with terms such as 'dazzle', 'shimmering', and 'waltzed' reinforcing Bessi's 'smiling brilliantly' to uphold a spectacle of performance as part of the culture of 'show business' in the area. Performance and dancing are integral to Soho's sense of self and as Bessi's interpretation of Digger's as a 'catwalk' makes clear, the area offers countless opportunities to perform versions of the gendered self in nuanced ways. Digger's is a stage through which Bessi appropriates sensualised images of women in the public domain.

The opportunities available to women in this culture have chauvinistic undertones. Within this environment, Bessi delivers a gendered performance which she hopes will command the attention of potential male spotters: 'spotters were usually hims,

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp.159-161

she assumed'.¹¹⁷ The glittering performance which Bessi delivers contradicts the tiredness she feels from becoming accustomed to 'being awake all night' and yet she continues to 'dazzle as late as 5 a.m.' in the knowledge that it is the exposure of her gendered and sexualised self which is most likely to mobilise her within this industry: 'She walked, with a bounce and a tray, up and down the metallic aisle, preferring to think of it as a catwalk (or something)'.¹¹⁸ The enjambed effect of Evans phrasing here emphasises the repetitive movement of the suggestive 'bounce' of Bessi's walk, insinuating the motion of her breasts as she struts 'up and down the aisle'.¹¹⁹

The representation of the 'spotter's' physicality – his 'big shoulders' clothed by the 'shimmering turquoise shirt' exudes an air of confidence, epitomising the male-oriented and ostentatious culture in which Bessi is working. Evans purposefully traces Bessi's body from the perspective of the spotter's eyes, assessing and evaluating 'all over', which emerge as a sinister symbol of the male gaze. Three verbs are deployed to track the specific processes which his eyes and, subsequently, his mind experience. The impartial analysis associated with the verb 'studying' is subverted here and replaced by the lascivious ogling which Bessi's body is subjected to. The acts of 'measuring' and 'imagining' shift into a sexual realm, foreshadowing the movement of 'the spotter's' hand over Bessi's hip. The term 'measuring' conjures images of scrutinising women's bodily proportions by evaluating the physical correlation between the breasts, waist and hips. The impalpability of 'imagining' renders it the most disturbing, transporting the image of Bessi's body from a busy, public space into the private and inaccessible chamber of 'the spotter's' mind. Evans alludes to the manner of fantasies that 'the spotter' has invoked in his mind through the description of him drawling as he whispers in Bessi's ear to invite her to leave with him. The episode vacillates between public and private realms, prompting questions concerning the specific ways in which body is imagined and consumed in the public realm.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.160

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.159

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*

Evans invites the reader to contemplate the tension between the 'real' interiority of the body and culturally and socially constituted versions of gender which women perform in public spaces. A return to Butler is useful here in appreciating the gendered and cultural nuances which Bessi calls upon to perform this version of herself. In 'Subversive Bodily Acts', Butler develops arguments around the notion of gender as a 'style', which is fashioned according to historical, cultural and social trends.¹²⁰ Butler's discussion marks the distinction between surface identities as cultural signs and what she terms, the 'interiority' of the human body.¹²¹ Butler's reading of performances of gender points to the fragility, and indeed, malleability of gender: '[...] gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all'.¹²² She argues that the societal upholding of binaries of gender relies upon the repetition of gendered performances which legitimise its very existence: 'gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*'.¹²³ Reading the extract from 26a within this theoretical framework renders Bessi's performance as an act of compliance, repeating a gendered act which is entrenched in our culture, to gratify and please 'the spotter'.

Butler's analysis assists in understanding the body as a precursor or platform for culture, only coming into being through a performance and provides a lens through which to read the instability of Bessi's performance. This reading captures the superficiality of gender in constituting a surface façade which is not representative of a subject's interiority. The fragility of 'maintaining gender', as Butler defines it, is symbolised by the dichotomy between Bessi's public performance and her internal thought-process. The juxtaposition between Bessi's outward 'stylized repetition of acts' and inner dialogue emphasises the exteriority of gendered performances. Bessi's internal commentary exposes the hesitation and uncertainty underpinning the seeming self-assurance engendered by her outward performance. The repetition of Bessi's 'or something' remarks convey her lack of experience and the illusory characteristics of her imagining of working in the music-industry. The tension

¹²⁰ Butler, 'Subversive Bodily Acts', p. 190

¹²¹ *Ibid*, p.189

¹²² *Ibid*, p.190

¹²³ *Ibid*, p. 190

between Bessi's aspirations and her reality is further emphasised by the use of spectacular words such as 'dazzle' and 'waltz', which draw attention to the performative aspects of the scene and equally reveal her naivety about the implications of such an overtly gendered performance.

Within the scene, Bessi performs a role that upholds traditionally male ideals of femininity to enhance her career prospects. Bessi's act of parading her body to advance her future career belongs to a patriarchal social order in which the woman subject relies exclusively upon her body to appeal to and gratify a male audience. In her provocative essay, 'Throwing Like a Girl', Iris Marion Young argues that integral to being a woman is the acceptance that 'one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations'.¹²⁴ Bessi's conscious manipulation of her body reflects an acceptance of being regarded as 'a mere body', demanding the onlooker's attention 'with her hips' and repeatedly asking to be looked upon: 'Can't you see me?' The motivation behind Bessi's performative act is a product of the patriarchal society in which she has been raised, preparing her to exploit hegemonic male attitudes towards the female body. Young recognises that:

The culture and society in which the female person dwells defines woman as Other, as the inessential correlate to man, as mere object and immanence. Woman is thereby both culturally and socially denied the subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity that are definitive of being human and that in patriarchal society are accorded to the man.¹²⁵

According to Young's theory, Bessi's sense of self has been colonised by cultural and social models of femininity and she resorts to objectifying her body to cultivate the appealing 'otherness' of an idealised femininity that will pander to male spotters' impulses. Bessi's performance signifies the ways in which the woman's body is owned by a wider patriarchal system and is therefore separate from constructions of 'self'. Bessi's performance is both problematic and productive. It participates in

¹²⁴ Iris Marion Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality' in *On Female Body Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.44

¹²⁵*Ibid*, p.31

reinforcing the hyper-masculine and chauvinistic culture of this London social space. At the same time, Bessi creatively and knowingly takes advantage of the spotter's assessment of her body to reclaim control over the particular version of her gendered self that she wishes to impart. The performance could therefore be interpreted as a re-inflection of the male gaze in manipulating the precise ways in which the woman's body is seen and recognised.

I cannot help but find Bessi's resorting to her body as a bleak comment upon women's mobility. Other feminist interpretations argue the need for women to recover their own sense of the erotic from being hi-jacked by male fantasies about women's sexuality. Bessi's first, and what she clearly deems as her most effective tool for advancement, is her body. However, prominent feminist thinkers note the powerful and productive possibilities of sexualised gendered performances. Audre Lorde's influential and prominent work on women's embodiment of the erotic points to the empowering aspects of Bessi's performance. Lorde's theory re-inflects Young's depiction of women as 'object[s]' to present a revealing of the erotic as a masterful assertion of a subject's sexual self. According to Lorde, Bessi's bold performance of her erotic self is resourceful: 'The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in the deeply female and spiritual plane'.¹²⁶ Lorde cites individual engagements with the erotic as empowering, asserting that it is a:

[...] false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong. But that strength is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of male modes of power.¹²⁷

Lorde's reading of the erotic therefore may suggest possibilities for resituating Bessi's performance as a means of re-claiming authority over her own body by fashioning the ways in which it is read and recognised within this Soho environment, calling upon her erotic self as a 'a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation'.¹²⁸ Other feminist commentaries on

¹²⁶ Lorde, 'Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power' in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, p. 53

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 53

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 54

displays of female sexuality equally define it as a powerful strategy for challenging traditional depictions of women as submissive and subject to the control of men. In her innovative feminist text, *Erotic Faculties*, Joanna Frueh endorses women's exposure of their bodies in exposing the breaking down of sexist images attached to the female form. 'I am not promoting femininity', Frueh claims, 'but rather its fluidity'¹²⁹: 'Even though femininity is misogyny's attempt to sanitize the female body, femininity is also a complex of pleasures that are lived and available and that women can use in order to change them'.¹³⁰ While I fully endorse Lorde's reading of the erotic and Frueh's reading of femininity in their potential to encourage women's re-claiming of sexuality as a source of autonomy over their own bodies, I am not convinced that Bessi's gendered performance pursues the same agenda and I remain sceptical of a woman subject's capacity to exercise control over the ways in which her body is read and recognised within a complex public urban setting such as Digger's. Bessi's anxious thoughts and uncertainty over what she is making her body 'do' suggests a less empowering sense of her embodied self than Lorde is proposing.

Bessi is certainly unable to maintain control over the specifically racial and gendered paradigms which her body is subjected to. If the extract from Evans's novel were read independently from the rest of the text, the reader would most likely be unaware of Bessi's Nigerian-British dual heritage. Evans' reluctance to explicitly present Bessi's racial identity as a factor which contributes to 'the spotter's' assessment of her body participates in the novel's wider refusal to depict race as a determining force in the protagonists' trajectories. Evans' approach is one which I both respect and endorse and yet, the subtle and nuanced infiltration of racialised readings of the body are implicit to my interpretation of the scene.

Felly Nkweto Simmonds calls upon her own embodied experience as a black woman to argue the case that within 'this white world, the Black body, my body, is always

¹²⁹ Joanna Frueh, 'Polymorphous Perversities: Female Pleasures and the Postmenopausal Artist' in *Erotic Faculties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p.84

¹³⁰ *Ibid*

on display'.¹³¹ Citing artistic manifestations of 'other' societies' in nineteenth century art as a point of reference, Simmonds explores the ways in which images of black women's bodies summon colonial histories:

Adorned and unadorned I cannot escape the fantasies of the western imagination. Robert Young illustrates this desire for colonized bodies as spectacle, as labour and so on, as essentially an extension to the 'desiring machine' of capital. This has particular implications for the female body, and is highlighted by anthropology's particular fascination with female bodies and with sexual lives. In this sense, sexuality becomes part of the political economy of desire, for money, for products and for those who produce.¹³²

Simmond's allusion to the intimate relationship between the economics of sexuality and power hierarchies summons historical cases of the sale of bodies. Simmonds' personal commentary shares her difficulties in escaping historical trajectories surrounding the objectification of the black woman subject, asserting that 'as a Black woman, my body cannot escape this history'.¹³³ This notion of the body as a product of racialised and gendered histories relates to Bessi's performance. Bessi speaks to the spotter with 'her teeth' to presumably flaunt their whiteness and support her attempts to 'dazzle' him. However, the noting of Bessi's teeth in relation to Simmonds' alignment of sexuality with an 'economy of desire' and 'money' opens up a problematic racialised subtext. This emphasis on teeth resonates with a longer tradition of assessing the black body for its economic worth and conjures images of slave-owners inspecting potential slave's teeth at auctions as an indication of general health and strength. In this sense, the scene is reminiscent of Crusoe's first encounter with Friday in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in which the protagonist compares his new acquaintance's teeth to 'ivory': '[...] his fine teeth well set, and white as Ivory'.¹³⁴ The imperialist undertones of Crusoe's alignment of Friday's

¹³¹ Felly Nkweto Simmonds, 'My body, myself' in *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge 1997), p.231

¹³² Simmonds, p.232, quoting Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.168

¹³³ Simmonds, p.232

¹³⁴ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2007), p.173

teeth with the exploitation of natural resources as a commodity contextualises 'the spotter's' assessment on Bessi's teeth in an historically racialised framework.

Bessi aligns her own performance within those of African-American women performers and in doing so, initiates the dimension of race into the dialogue. Another interpretation of Bessi's presentation of gender 'with her hips' and 'with her teeth', which she acknowledges as a form of mimicking the spectacle of a 'Mary J. Blige' performance, equally engages with racialised and gendered readings of the body. Bessi's reference to Blige reflects her presumption that her progression in the music industry is more likely to depend on her capacity to appropriate a certain image, than to harness her singing talent. The swagger embodied by Blige's performances, especially in the early stages of her career, cohered to a form of gendered authority within a hip-hop context which demanded confidence and conviction. Blige's performances powerfully reclaimed women's sexuality in a hyper-masculine culture in which, for example, female backing dancer's bodies were constantly exposed and displayed to bolster the typically male performer's macho persona. A closer consideration of the performances of contemporary black women performers is useful here in further understanding the ways in which sexuality is displayed on a public stage as a means of invoking agency. Bessi's performance, the images she embodies through 'her hips' and 'her teeth', echo a long tradition of black women performers asserting strong and powerful stage personas as a means of empowerment.

Carby's work on the sexualisation of 1920s African-American women blues singers helps to theorise the racialised subjectivity attached to Bessi's performance in relation to historical presentations of the black woman subject on stage:

A variety of narratives both fictional and biographical have mythologized the woman blues singer and these mythologies become texts about sexuality. Women blues singers frequently appear as liminal figures that play out and explore the various possibilities of a sexual existence; they are representations of women who

attempt to manipulate and control their construction as sexual subjects.¹³⁵

Carby's allusion to the management of this performance of sexuality implies a control over the ways in which sexuality is interpreted. The content of the blues sung by such performers served to reinforce a partial reclaiming of selfhood and, as Carby highlights, 'most of the songs that asserted a woman's independence did so in relation to men not women'.¹³⁶ Carby observes that singing the blues 'sought possibilities, possibilities that arose from women being on the move and confidently asserting their own sexual desirability'.¹³⁷ The mobility which arose from women's blues singers' performances connects to Bessi's motivation for performing for the spotter in Digger's. Her performance, albeit arguably less professional and controlled (as represented by the moments of hesitation and uncertainty she expresses), could be interpreted, according to Carby's theory, as an opening of a space in which to confidently perform her racial and gendered self. Against this milieu, Shayne Lee's study on contemporary African-American women artists demonstrates a culture of performing inherited from blues singers such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.

Lee's *Erotic Revolutionaries* offers an exploration of black woman figures in contemporary popular culture. The text's commentary on Beyoncé Knowles appropriates the connotations attached to Bessi's allusion to Blige to the twenty-first century. Knowles has built an empire around the exposure of her body in an ambivalent way which appeals to both men and women. Lee observes that:

[...] Beyoncé takes on varying personas: she's bursting with passion and lust; she's chastising her man for infidelity and betrayal; she's lonely; she's basking in her own seductive powers. Her catchy hooks become anthems that reflect the sentiments of many young women. She draws from an array of symbolic resources at her disposal to express herself as free, sensual, and alive.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Carby, 'The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues', p. 11

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, p.16

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, p.18

¹³⁸ Shayne Lee, 'Sultry Divas of Pop and Soul: Janet, Beyoncé, and Jill' in *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture* (Plymouth: Hamilton Books, 2010), p.17

Lee's discussion of the sense of solidarity fashioned by Knowles' performances reinforces the feminist agenda of her 'erotic revolution'. Commonly referred to as 'Queen B', Lee presents Knowles as a leader, suggesting that her performances inspire other women to revel in their agency and sexual autonomy¹³⁹: 'these artists inspire women to embrace more proactive scripts for female sexuality, ultimately illustrating for women that sexuality and power can go hand in hand'.¹⁴⁰ Lee also suggests that Knowles' presentation of sexuality encourages women to seek pleasure and a sense of release via the emancipative feeling attached to sexually-charged gendered performances. Noting the effect evoked and atmosphere generated by women dancing to Beyoncé in a nightclub, Lee observes: 'After the song concludes, catharsis is achieved as the sexual anointing recedes and the women revert to their previous personas'.¹⁴¹ The catharsis engendered from such sexualised performances resonates with Lorde's endorsement of the erotic and rationalises Bessi's motioning to Blige's performances as emblems of sexual confidence and liberation. Blige embodies the same potential for sexual emancipation and autonomy over her own body for Bessi as Knowles does for a contemporary generation of women.

Countering this suggestion of release and liberation, Lee is aware of the inventive resources which Knowles has access to, suggesting that the power of her performance resides in her complete control of how her body is read and recognised:

She dances, shakes, trembles, screams, jumps, poses with her hand on hip, smiles, and captivates her audience with a visual orgy [...] she presents sensuality as power; she is in full control of the men who appear onstage as well as her own erotic energy.¹⁴²

Lee's analysis of Knowles' 'full control' contrasts with Bessi's realisation, 'Oh. It's not him', when she grasps that her audience is not who she had presumed him to be. Similarly to Knowles' use of 'scripts', Bessi calls upon models of stereotyped

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, p.21

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 22

¹⁴¹ Lee, p.17

¹⁴² *Ibid*, p.17

feminine sexuality in a way which echoes Butler's 'rehearsed' performance of gender¹⁴³:

[...] gender is an act which has been rehearsed [...] Complex components that go into an act must be distinguished in order to understand the kind of acting in concert and acting in accord which acting one's gender invariably is.¹⁴⁴

Butler's 'rehearsed' and Lee's 'scripted' performances of sexuality reinforce the idea of gender as a carefully constituted social and cultural act, rather than an instinctive human one. Lee's analysis, mediated through the figure of Knowles, reinforces Butler's suggestion that the empowering aspect of gendered performance lies in the subject's ability to draw upon schematic and organised schemas. Bessi's performance in Digger's contrasts with Knowles' in its absence of the control and authority that the singer exercises over the projection of her body. Her attempts to assert her sexual confidence and maturity is undermined by her eagerness to 'hurry', 'dazzle' and impress, exposing a lack of rehearsal which renders her susceptible to the predator-like actions of the spotter. Bessi's unrehearsed performance is in stark contrast to Knowles' obvious and careful professionalism.

Lee potentially overlooks the fact that Knowles' performances rely upon stereotypical ideas of what constitutes female sexuality, conforming to familiar commodified images of the woman's body which her young female fan-base are susceptible to. In other moments in the novel Bessi reveals a gendered consciousness over upholding stereotypically 'feminine' images. A teenage Bessi expresses a need to wear 'Wonderbras to get cleavage' and 'to wear lipstick and eyeliner wherever she went'.¹⁴⁵ In a scene in which the twins are getting ready to go on their first dates, the critique and scrutiny which they subject their bodies to epitomise gendered pressures of conforming to standardised images of physical attractiveness. The 'full-length mirror' in the twins' bedroom symbolically signifies wider societal distorted views on female embodiment:

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p.18

¹⁴⁴ Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', p.526

¹⁴⁵ Evans, 26a, p.110

The two of them got caught at once, and the bad things doubled. The thighs, the bums. Just look at those legs, they thought. Athlete's legs. Oh why had God given them bulges – thighs, bums, foreheads? It wasn't fair. Georgia had skipped lunch in preparation for the evening. Bessi felt bloated from the chicken sandwich she'd eaten. 'What about me,' she said. 'I look like a whale!'¹⁴⁶

While the twins generally perceive their 'double-ness' as a source of security in the novel, the 'doubled' reflections of their bodies in the mirror compounds anxieties around self-image. The comically hyperbolic tone of the twins' distress over the unfairness of having 'bulges – thighs, bums [...]' is undercut by Georgia having starved herself that day and Bessi's concern of her bloated stomach brought about by eating a sandwich. Instead of identifying their athletic legs as a sign of strength or physical fitness, the twins are critical of their bodies' non-conforming to bodily compositions which they think others deem most attractive. In presenting such tensions, Evans' compellingly captures the universal insecurities which shape women's teenage experiences posing queries regarding the origins of such negative attitudes towards self-image and young women's exposure to unhealthy 'standards' set by a wider heteropatriarchy and paradoxically perpetuated by role-models such as Knowles.

Knowles belongs to a group of African-American women artists who 'expose their flesh and relish their sexual power'.¹⁴⁷ Lee's analysis clearly celebrates the agency engendered by Knowles' capacity to embody multiple versions of women's experience, but also runs the risk of cementing women's bodies as objects of male desire. Feminist critic, Jennifer Nash's review of *Erotic Revolutionaries* commends Lee's compelling capturing of the contradictions which underpin Knowles' 'erotic freedom' as an embodiment of black feminism.¹⁴⁸ Yet, Nash also queries the feminist agenda of 'revealing' hyper-sexualised versions of the woman's body to the extent to which Knowles' performances demand:

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp.119-120

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.18

¹⁴⁸ Jennifer C. Nash, 'Theorizing Pleasure: New Directions in Black Feminist Studies', *Feminist Studies*, 28:2 (2012), p.509

What does it mean that so many erotic revolutionaries make [...] choices about representing their sexual agency, choices that center on *revealing* their bodies, their pleasures, and their longings? Why is visibility the hall-mark of liberation? What makes visibility more liberated than restraint or respectability?¹⁴⁹

My own views on this issue align with Nash's comments. The 'erotic revolution' of Knowles' performance of gender is built upon a paradoxical dyad which perpetuates male fantasies of the woman subject's body and reinforces Carby's and Simmonds' anxieties around the historical trend of the black woman subject's body always being on display. The highly sexualised tone of Knowles' performances equally arguably contributes to the endurance of myths around black women as highly-sexualised beings.

Lee's assessment of the importance of public displays of female sexuality in advancing the woman's movement in contemporary society challenges my assertions and puts forward a case for reading Knowles' performances as manifestations of what he terms, 'third-wave feminism'.¹⁵⁰ In the conclusion to *Erotic Revolutionaries*, Lee articulately summarises the ambivalences and complexities underpinning this contemporary expression of womanhood, arguing that:

[...] the feminist schemas of previous generations as less ambiguous [...] their agendas seem to find shape in a clearer set of objectives. Whether it is fighting for suffrage, the Equal Rights Amendment [...] reproductive rights [...] objectives of the first and second waves of the feminist movement appear quite lucid when put adjacent to the murky waters that characterize my generation's feminist agendas.¹⁵¹

Lee proceeds to highlight the fact that third-wave feminism 'perceive[s] women's sexual agency and exploration as fundamental as their right to vote'.¹⁵² Lee's

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁵⁰ Lee, p.123

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.123

¹⁵² *Ibid*, p.125

appropriation of ideas surrounding female embodiment and sexualised gendered performances to the twenty-first century suggests that the theorisation of women's embodiment has moved on from ideas surrounding the body politic and the body as a cultural signifier. Lee's model instead focuses on the specific strategies which woman subjects can deploy to embody and perform their erotic and sexualised selves confidently and without the fear of being continually subjected to gendered, social, racial or political systems.

'Good' and 'Bad' Representations of the Female Body

Evans' representation of the woman's body, mediated through Bessi's performance at Digger's, reflects a contemporary feminist approach to black female embodiment which refuses to adopt a definitive model. As Nash articulates, there exists 'a growing body of scholarship produced across the disciplines that puts an end to the long-standing debate over "good" and "bad" representations of the black female body'.¹⁵³ Nash's comments connect to representations of the woman subject's body beyond racialised discourses to comment upon changing attitudes within feminist criticism towards the woman subject's power to take back control of her body and dictate the specific ways in which it is read and recognised within different physical, cultural and social contexts. As the engagement with Lee's 'erotic revolutionaries' illustrates, the displaying of highly-sexualised images of women's bodies has not subsided within contemporary culture, but the discourse surrounding it has become more nuanced.

As *26a*'s negotiation of female embodiment makes clear, a subject's power to draw upon and mobilise varied images, cultural references and gendered expectations has the potential to be productive, but can equally re-enshrine misogynistic gender hierarchies. The critics that this chapter has engaged with agree that gender is a social construct which can be managed and fashioned according to the specific environment in which it is being performed. While Lorde's and Frueh's

¹⁵³ Nash, 'Theorizing Pleasure', p.514

commentaries on the performance of gender and sexuality argue that there is an empowerment to be rendered from assertions of gendered and erotic performances, Butler's theories reveal the fragility of gender and the need to carefully monitor and be conscious of society's protection of certain power systems through gendered performances. Bessi's gendered performance exemplifies the level of control and in fact, professionalism, required in the woman subject's reading of her audience and the potential implications of the exposure of a gendered, sexualised persona. The partial reclaiming of embodiment enacted through Bessi's performance is undermined by the sexist and chauvinistic culture of the space in which it is performed.

Bessi's performance conveys how places emerge as strikingly different spaces for men and women. Prominent representations of Soho map it as an open and alternative destination which has historically rejected any pressure to conform to repressive models or systems which could limit a subject's capacity to live life to the full. Evans' depiction of the place reveals its paradoxical complicity in potentially nurturing a culture in which men's predatory entitlement to sex is accepted and perpetuated. While Soho remains a sanctuary of non-conformity for so many, the extract from *26a* suggests that it upholds rigid gendered hierarchies which limit a woman subject's capacity to mobilise herself within the spaces it cultivates.

I pursue the tension between the ways in which men and women occupy space differently in the next section of this chapter. An engagement with the mother characters in Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's novels shifts the discussion of performances of gender roles into the domestic space. Familiar representations of women's occupation of space would suggest that mother figures are most 'at home' in domestic spaces and yet, the selected novels derail this presumption in conveying the gendered politics of familial life. Like Bessi, the mother characters' performance of gender questions the systems and institutions through which the woman's body is read and recognised.

Performances of Gender in Private London Spaces: Mother Characters and the Domestic Sphere

*Carmel rolls out of bed in that blue nylon
nightie with ruffles at the cleavage that
sticks to her various bodyparts
when she walks. (Un-for-tu-nate-ly.)*¹⁵⁴

The Mother Figure

The rationale for exploring the representations of mother figures in the selected novels derives from an interest in understanding the presentation of matriarchal figures 'at home' in domestic spaces. As Nancy Chodorow's feminist study on motherhood reveals, 'mothering' is defined 'as a central and constituting element in the social organization and reproduction of gender'.¹⁵⁵ An exploration of the mapping of mother figures in domestic spaces in the selected texts conveys the specific ways in which performances of gender manifest themselves in private spaces. At the same time, a consideration of the mother characters refocuses the thesis' interest in young protagonists, all of whom were born and raised in the city to their mothers, who migrated to London as young women from Nigeria, Antigua and Jamaica respectively. Such an evaluation opens up a dialogue concerning gendered and inter-generational dynamics in contemporary London families and queries contrasting generational mappings of the city and the domestic spaces within it.

Within feminist criticism, discourses on representations of motherhood are divided. On the one hand, motherhood productively distinguishes women from men precisely because, as Barbara Christian notes, it is only 'a woman, never a man' that 'can be a

¹⁵⁴ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.15

¹⁵⁵ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978), p.6

mother, or a daughter'.¹⁵⁶ The potential which lies in women's capacity to give birth to new life can be interpreted as an empowering reclaiming of embodiment against a patriarchy which systematically exercises authority over the female body. In spite of this, society's treatment of motherhood participates in problematising women's agency as the role of mother is frequently, as Susheila Nasta points out, 'imposed upon women as their main identity, their *proper* identity above all others'.¹⁵⁷ Adrienne Rich makes a related point in her assertion that '[t]hroughout] recorded history the "childless" woman has been regarded [...] as a failed woman, unable to speak for the rest of her sex'.¹⁵⁸ The inextricability of constructions of gender with motherhood can have divisive implications, cultivating a lack of solidarity between women which is counter-productive to the feminist movement: 'whilst the historical reality is that motherhood is women's experience, the institution is frequently under male control'.¹⁵⁹ The institutionalisation of motherhood relating to society's upholding of the mother figure as a female ideal in fact re-enshrines certain gender hierarchies which feminism seeks to breakdown.

In the context of black British writing, the mother figure has historically been read as an emblem of the 'motherland'. Critiques of migration narratives align tensions around nationhood and displaced constructions of home with the idea of 'mother-nations'.¹⁶⁰ Elleke Boehmer suggests that 'the mother-figure stands for the national territory and for certain national values: symbolically she is ranged above the men; in reality she is kept below them'.¹⁶¹ As Boehmer's analysis makes clear, an examination of mother figures in black British women's writing inevitably brings postcolonial scholarship and feminism into dialogue with one another. Motherhood emerges as a nexus for postcolonial and feminist critiques of black British writing and, in the case of Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's work, provides a lens through which to assess performances of gender in diasporic contexts. This section of the chapter appropriates strands of thoughts within postcolonial and feminist scholarship to

¹⁵⁶ Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pergamon, 1986), p.212

¹⁵⁷ Nasta, p.xx

¹⁵⁸ Adrienne Rich, 'Motherhood and Daughterhood' in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), p.251

¹⁵⁹ Nasta, p.xx

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.xxi

¹⁶¹ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.27

explore these authors' presentations of mother characters' performance of motherhood and its wider relationship to conceptions of home and belonging in London.

As the introduction to this thesis makes clear, I wish to privilege the selected novels' representation of London and, in doing so, resist continually reading Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's perspectives as either 'postcolonial' or 'migrant' and equally move away from exclusively gendered engagements with their work. I am therefore aware of the paradox underpinning this exploration of migrant mothers' constructions of belonging and intimate relationship with the domestic space. Nevertheless, to not investigate the contrasting inter-generational attitudes between the novels' protagonists, all born and raised in London, and their mothers, all of whom migrated to London from other locations, would be to overlook the important statements which Evans, Evaristo and Levy are making on the cultural, social and generational factors which contribute to a subject's relationship with the city.

This part of the chapter focuses on three mother figures. Ida is the mother of the protagonist twins, Bessi and Georgia, in Evans' *26a*. Ida was born in Nigeria and met their English father, Aubrey, there when he was working abroad. When the novel is set, the Hunter family live in Neasden, North West London. *Mr Loverman* features Carmel, mother to Donna and Maxine, who lives with her husband, Barrington, in Hackney. Unlike the other selected novels, parts of the novel are set in the present-day, but recollect Carmel and Barrington's migration to London from Antigua in their early-twenties. Finally, Beryl is the mother of Angela, the protagonist of Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, and followed her husband, Winston, to live in a bedsit in Earls Court after he sailed to Britain from Jamaica on the Empire Windrush.

Embodiment in the Domestic Sphere

In investigating the differences between the performance of gender in public and private spheres, it is interesting to note the impact that becoming a mother has upon

a woman's mapping of the world. It is no coincidence that the selected extracts for this part of the chapter are, for the most part, set in domestic spaces. Mother figures and the domestic realm are culturally tied to one another and the London spaces presented here strikingly contrast with the lively, energetic and busy setting of Soho. The shift from Bessi's mapping of public London spaces to the mother figures' mapping of domestic spaces charts the shrinking of the outside city into small, and often cramped households which motherhood demands women occupy. In the case of the mothers of the selected novels, as first-generation migrants, the domestic space becomes even more significant in establishing an initial space of belonging. The notion of 'microcosmic' London, which this thesis is interested in unravelling, manifests itself in the mother characters' relationship to the city. Across all three of texts, the mother figures are primarily presented situated in the domestic space, their ventures into the wider city extending to a repetitive routine of responsibility to their families, made up of travelling to work, going to 'the shops' to buy ingredients for family meals, and in the case of Carmel and Beryl, visits to church.¹⁶² The city does not appear to open up the same opportunities for the mother characters as it does for their daughters. In this sense, it is important to note the simultaneously empowering and limiting impact motherhood can have on a woman's mobility.

Mr Loverman's Carmel exemplifies the ways in which motherhood transforms a woman's relationship to her own body and the spaces around her. As the epigraph to this chapter insinuates, Carmel's husband, Barrington, notes the changes which occur in the female body as a result of child-birth and subsequent maturation: 'Carmel rolls out of bed in that blue nylon nightie with ruffles at the cleavage that sticks to her various body parts when she walks. (*Un-for-tu-nate-ly*)'.¹⁶³ Barrington's comments clearly reinforce the alarming ways in which men and the wider patriarchal system critique the female form, the exaggerated and sarcastic tone of the elongated, hyphenated and italicized '*[U]n-for-tu-nate-ly*' embedding a culture which normalises and, indeed, finds humour in, objectifying women's bodies. Aside from the misogyny expressed in Barrington's statement, the description captures a

¹⁶² Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, p.8

¹⁶³ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.15

performance of gender which contrasts with Bessi's overtly sensualised walk 'with a bounce' in the extract from *26a*.¹⁶⁴ The spotter's 'measuring and imagining' of Bessi's 'hips' is recast in a familial domestic setting in which Carmel's embodiment has been desexualized. The ill-fighting nighty which Carmel wears 'sticks' to her 'curves', rather than accentuates her womanly shape. The 'nylon' material of the nightdress, coupled with the description of Carmel 'roll[ing]' out of bed suggests a prioritisation of comfort and functionality over anything which might reveal her sexualised self.

The changes which Carmel's body undergoes in the years of marriage emerge as a motif in the chapters of the novel which Barrington narrates. Barrington expresses a nostalgia for Carmel's 'taut little body' which he uses as a platform from which to trace changes to her physical appearance brought about by maturation.¹⁶⁵ In another extract, taken from a scene in which Barrington takes his wife to Heathrow Airport to begin her journey to Antigua, he traces the trajectory of Carmel's embodiment from when he met her to the present-day. Written from his perspective as he observes her walking away from him, the assessment resonates with notions of the male gaze that objectifies women:

I watched her shuffle through the departure gate wearing one of those shapeless cardigans that reaches the knees, limping with that bad hip or back or whichever one it is, her feet in those orthopedic-looking shoes women wear where they're not interested in trying to impress men no more. Big Mistake. Is trying to impress us that keep them on their toes [...] Yet this was the girl that used to quick-step everywhere in her clickety-clicks, glancing about her like a ballerina striking a calculated pose to catch everybody with her loveliness, always beautifully attired in those flowery dresses splashed with bright colours women wore in the fifties, her hourglass figure clinched with a wide purple belt.¹⁶⁶

Barrington's comment regarding Carmel's 'orthopedic-shoes' is worth noting here,

¹⁶⁴ Evans, *26a*, p.160

¹⁶⁵ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.77

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.76

the aesthetics of which cause offence in a similar way to the nightdress and which he determines as a symbol of Carmel's retirement from 'trying to impress men'. In demonstrating little concern for his wife's 'bad hip or back or whichever one it is' and the therapeutic qualities of the shoes, Barrington's remarks capture a chauvinistic presumption in reducing women's agenda to 'impress[ing] men'. The capitalisation of 'Big Mistake' is emphatic, clearly signaling that women's being relies upon the very assurance of the male gaze and adoration. The juxtaposition between the two versions of Carmel is epitomised by the 'shapeless[ness]' of her cardigan, the long, draping silhouette of which is further emphasised by the simile comparing the elegance and poise embodied by her younger self to a 'ballerina'. Carmel's 'calculated pose to catch everybody's attention' is again reminiscent of Bessi's deliberate use of her body to appeal to her audience, the suspected 'spotter'. The image invoked by Carmel's 'clickety-clicks' high-heels and 'flowery dresses splashed with bright colours' is one of youthful femininity, capturing, albeit from a male gazer's point of view, a confident performance of self. The silhouette of Carmel's body which Barrington alludes to traces the sensuality and sexuality his wife embodied in her youth. His focus on the 'wide purple belt' which 'clinched' her 'hourglass figure' again upholds a certain male ideal of the female form and strikingly contrasts to the formlessness of her cardigan and nightdress. The connotations attached to the appeal of an 'hourglass' shape and the male idealisation of it ironically derives from a subconscious appreciation of this body type's aptitude for child-rearing.¹⁶⁷ Paradoxically, Carmel's pre-pregnancy 'large womanly hips' please Barrington and a wider patriarchal order in their indication of her body's capacity to carry and nurture children.¹⁶⁸ The curves which she embodies in the later years of her life, notably as a result of giving birth to two of Barrington's children, appear to disappoint her husband in their failure to conform to unrealistic and chauvinistic male expectations imposed upon the female body.

Evaristo purposefully complicates Carmel's performance of gender to resist her being defined solely on the basis of Barrington's archaic and bias views on gender.

¹⁶⁷ See Shannon K. Carter, 'Beyond control: body and self in women's childbearing narratives', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 32:7, (2010) pp. 993–1009 [doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9566.2010.01261.x]

¹⁶⁸ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.207

Carmel's narrative exposes the ways in which factors such as age, romantic relationships and motherhood are implicated in a woman's performance and embodiment of her gender. In the presentation of Carmel's post-natal depression, Evaristo exposes the implications of pressures around motherhood. Nasta's analysis highlights the ways in which society's idealisation of motherhood can feel like a burden for women: 'the potential of women to be mothers often conditions their entire lives'.¹⁶⁹ The guilt which Carmel attaches to her post-natal struggle with her mental health is reflective of a wider failure to address the realities of becoming a mother and the challenges posed by it: '*life goes on no matter what you feeling, no matter that you crying and feel / like dying / shape up Carmel, shape up and look after your family [...]*'.¹⁷⁰ Carmel's narrative is intermittently presented in italics to indicate an internal thought process and dialogue which she is perhaps afraid to articulate out loud. Carmel's reference to '*dying*' reveals the extent to which her post-natal depression has impacted her outlook on the world and yet, she is determined to suppress what she feels for the sake of her family. I cannot help but note the ways in which the repetition of '*shape up [...] shape up*' resonates with the phrase 'man up' in contemporary discourse, often deployed to insist a subject refrains from showing any sign of weakness or vulnerability to fulfil traditional responsibilities of 'a man' in suppressing emotions and maintaining a macho image. The term '*shape up*' similarly demands a gendered obligation to fulfil a certain role, representing a tough approach to overcoming her ill-health to enable Carmel to perform what she deems her maternal duties. Carmel's approach to her own recovery reflects an endemic cultural issue of defending hegemonic gendered roles to the detriment of a subject's mental health.

The lack of control and disorder which Carmel's first engagement with motherhood entails is supported by sociological studies on childbearing, which contend that 'many women [...] experience pregnancy and childbirth as periods when self-control over the body is suspended'.¹⁷¹ Rich's conceptualisation of the 'power and powerlessness' felt in the aftermath of birth assists in further understanding

¹⁶⁹ Nasta, p.xx

¹⁷⁰ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.73

¹⁷¹ Carter, p.994

Carmel's disposition and points to a hegemonic denial of the psychological complexities of pregnancy and childbirth:

No one mentions the psychic crisis of bearing a [...] child, [...] the sense of confused power and powerlessness, of being taken over on the one hand and of touching new physical and psychic potentialities on the other, a heightened sensibility which can be exhilarating, bewildering, and exhausting.¹⁷²

The silence around the psychological implications of becoming a mother which Rich's analysis allude to convey the ambivalences inherent to motherhood which are so often overlooked in favour of presenting the fulfilling and empowering aspects of child rearing. Carmel's attitude towards her post-natal depression revolves around embarrassment and shame. In a chapter which Carmel narrates entitled '*Song of Despair*', she punishes herself for being unable to perform the tasks which 'mothers supposed to do' in her current state of health.¹⁷³ The repetition of the phrase '*whether you feel like it or not*' epitomises a rejection of individual feeling and emotion for the sake of fulfilling gendered expectations:¹⁷⁴

Barry's the man you always thought he could be, right this minute feeding Maxine cow's milk from a bottle in the kitchen when you got a milk cart full of the stuff in your boobies that could feed a whole nursery full of babies / how can you not feed your own child, you monster? / like you got anything else to be getting on with?¹⁷⁵

The lack of punctuation and fragmented narrative style accentuates Carmel's volatile position and the lack of control implicated in child-bearing. In spite of clearly being not well enough to take responsibility for her children, Carmel demonises herself as a 'monster' for not being able to feed her daughter, Maxine. The self-punishment she inflicts on herself, frustrated at not having 'anything else to be getting on with', but unable to engage with her child, encapsulates the cycle of

¹⁷² Rich, 'The Sacred Calling', p.43

¹⁷³ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.67

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p.68

depression engrained in post-natal mental health. At the same time, moments in her narrative such as these force the reader to question whether she is complicit in perpetuating gendered hierarchies around parental duties and the pressures placed upon mothers. While Carmel burdens herself with guilt, Barrington is hailed with praise. Her inability to perform maternal acts such as feeding her babies, which she considers fundamental to her role as a mother, disturbs her construction of gender structures and roles within the domestic sphere. As Young recognises, 'The body as lived is always enculturated: by the phonemes a body learns to pronounce at a very early age, by the clothes the person wears that mark her nation, her age, her occupational status, and in what is culturally expected or required of women'.¹⁷⁶ Young's analysis resonates with Carmel's critical approach in emphasising the cultural signifier of 'mother', which is so often attached to the woman subject's body. Carmel's distress derives from her sense of 'failing' to commit to 'what is culturally expected or required of women' in adopting the role of mother.

Earlier on in the novel, as a young woman, Carmel expresses her intention to conform to traditional models of being the dutiful wife, ensuring that 'when your husband gets back from work, home will be a *haven of rest and order*'.¹⁷⁷ Carmel's studying of the 'Home Economics manual' for inspiration is loosely based on Evaristo's own mother and points to the generational and cultural gendered conventions Carmel inherits from her own mother and generations of women before her. In an interview with Jennifer Gustar, Evaristo articulates her surprise at the sexism entrenched in the performances of gender which Carmel and her mother's generation of women were expected to enact in their households:

[...] Carmel is already married to Barry, and she's thinking about the home economics manual that she read at school, which said that when your husband gets home you must have a nice smile on your face, you have the dinner in the oven, you have a ribbon in your hair. And I got all this from a real home economics manual. I said to my mum, "Is this a thing from the 1950s, Mum? This isn't really what you were taught, is it?" And she said, "Oh, yes. And we believed it." And I said, "You didn't?" "Oh, yes," she said. "When I married your father

¹⁷⁶ Young, 'Lived Body vs. Gender', p. 17

¹⁷⁷ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.20

that's what I thought'.¹⁷⁸

The image of the 'nice smile on your face' and 'ribbon in your hair' here is reminiscent of the depiction of the floral and bright coloured dresses of Carmel's youth, which conform to Barrington's model of feminine beauty. Carmel's and Evaristo's mother's performance of gender belongs to a wider generational matriarchal Caribbean culture. The fact that this generation 'believed', as Evaristo's mother articulates, in the gendered schemas put forward to them by cultural artifacts such as the 'home economics manual' demonstrates the entrenched gender roles upheld within Caribbean culture. In his text, 'Learning to Be a Man', queer theorist Barry Chevannes appropriates ideas around repeated performances of gender to critique the perpetuation of hyper-masculine identities in the Caribbean. Chevannes' study contextualises some of the ideas surrounding Butler's theories on performances of gender within the Caribbean, exploring what he calls 'the socialization of gender' to understand constructions of masculinity. His study sets out to:

[...] identify the processes and events through which Caribbean males were imbued with knowledge of the roles they were expected to play as boys and later as men; the process through which they acquired the status of manhood; and the concomitant attitudes and values shaping their conception of themselves and their relations with others, females and males.¹⁷⁹

As Chevannes recognises, 'the study of one gender is offset against the other' and his exploration of the construction of male identity in the Caribbean to comparatively read the performance of gender by women in London is productive.¹⁸⁰ While his work is clearly contextualised according to repeated performances of hyper-masculinity, I find it useful to call-upon as an example of the polarisation of gender roles in a Caribbean context. In this sense, Chevannes reading of Caribbean's men's awareness of the 'roles they were expected to play' extends to the mother characters

¹⁷⁸ Evaristo, quoted in Gustar, p.15

¹⁷⁹ Barry Chevannes, 'Introduction' in *Learning to Be a Man: Culture, Socialization and Gender Identity in Five Caribbean Communities* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2001), p.5

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.6

presented in the selected novels, who inherit the clearly-defined 'attitudes and values' attached to gender within the Caribbean in their diasporic London environment.

Performances of Gender in Diasporic Domestic Spheres

Sara Ahmed's engaging work, *The Promise of Happiness*, assesses different social, cultural and temporal manifestations of happiness. The chapter entitled 'Melancholic Migrants' is useful in contextualising the behavioural trends of some of the novels' mother characters. Within the essay, Ahmed aligns the agenda of 'multiculturalism' with unhappiness:

[H]appiness is imagined as social glue, as being what sticks people together [...] The mission to put glue back into communities not only suggests that communities lack such glue but also that they once had it [...] migration enters the narrative as an unhappiness cause, as what forces people who are "unlike" to live together.¹⁸¹

Ahmed's analysis alludes to a politics of multiculturalism which insists that subjects perpetuate the 'happy clappy' façade attached to the notion of subjects from diverse cultural and social backgrounds living harmoniously alongside one another as a single cohesive community. In this sense, Ahmed's term 'the melancholic migrant' provides a language through which to understand the novels' mothers' wider relationship with the city in which they have settled:

Migrants as would-be citizens are thus increasingly bound by the happiness duty to not speak about racism in the present, not to speak of the unhappiness of colonial histories, or of attachments that cannot be reconciled into the colourful diversity of the multicultural nation. [...] The happiness duty is a positive duty to speak of what is good but can also be thought of as a negative duty not to speak of what is not

¹⁸¹ Sara Ahmed, 'Melancholic Migrants' in *The Promise of Happiness*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp.121-122

good, not to speak from or out of unhappiness.¹⁸²

Leaving aside the temporal idiosyncrasies between ‘multiculturalism’ as a millennial phenomenon, the 1960s-1970s setting of Levy’s *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and the 1980s-1990s setting of Evans’ *26a*, there are parallels to be drawn between the figure of the ‘melancholic migrant’ and the novels’ mother characters.

Ahmed’s examination of a ‘positive duty to speak of what is good’ and a ‘negative duty not to speak of what is not good’ applies to the approach adopted by Beryl Jacobs, the mother of the novel’s protagonist, Angela, in *Every Light in the House Burnin’*. Beryl’s strategy in the city is one of silence. Levy’s motivation to write the novel was tied to an urge to record something of her father and the illness leading to his eventual death.¹⁸³ Maria Helena Lima notes that the ‘central presence in *Every Light in the House Burnin’* is not the mother, (or a mother-substitute), as in many of the Caribbean novels by women [...] it is her dying father whom the narrator wishes to understand’.¹⁸⁴ The narrative’s focus on the deteriorating health of Winston, Angela’s father, and the complexities underpinning his treatment within the National Health Service in the last months of his life, serves to reinforce Levy’s presentation of Beryl. Beryl appears to be most comfortable in a background setting. While she clearly manages the household, shopping, cooking and cleaning to provide for her family, she does so quietly and without any complaint. Beryl does not occupy space assertively, but rather in a way which compliantly upholds, as Ahmed articulates it, her ‘duty’ to present her British life as happy.

In the reader’s first encounter with Beryl, Angela introduces her mother as ‘a teacher [...] an educated woman’¹⁸⁵:

She started her working career in Jamaica where she earned her own living. Then she married my dad and they decided to come to England to find ‘better opportunity’. [...] My mum joined my dad in his one

¹⁸² *Ibid*, p.158

¹⁸³ See Maria Helena Lima, “Pivoting the Centre”: The Fiction of Andrea Levy’ in *Write Black, Write British*, (Ed.) Kadija Sesay (Hertford: Hansib, 2005), pp.59-60

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p.59

¹⁸⁵ Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin’*, p.8

room in London. But the English wouldn't let her teach. They said she had to retrain before she could stand before English children. My mum didn't have the money to retrain [...] When I was five and old enough to go to school, my mum [...] went back to college to become again what she had always been – a teacher. After three years of washing, cooking, college, feeding, homework, bed, washing, cooking, college, feeding, homework, bed, she got her diploma.¹⁸⁶

The shrinking of Beryl's world from the autonomy she exercised in pursuing her career as a teacher in Jamaica to the monotonousness of 'washing, cooking, college' in Britain assigns a sense of irony to the idea of life in London offering 'better opportunity'. Lima corroborates this view, stating that Beryl is depicted 'hiding either in the kitchen or in her room studying' in a way which emphasises, as Lima highlights, her 'resignation, omissions, and silences'.¹⁸⁷ The repetitive routine of household chores, combined with the studying required to secure her diploma, appears tedious in comparison to the value and respectability attached to the identity of a teacher. Angela's account of her mother's trajectory echoes the sentiments of Ahmed's assessment of a culture which coerces migrants to set aside instances of discrimination and racism to promote a positive image of a cohesive society. The matter of fact way in which Angela conveys the injustice of the system's treatment of migrant subjects – '[...] the English wouldn't let her teach' – further emphasises Beryl's submission to the conventions and regulations of British society. Considering that she is already a qualified teacher, the need to study for another degree to enable her to teach in the British education system is frustrating. A further irony lies in the fact that given the time at which the novel is set, Beryl would have taught a colonial syllabus in Jamaica and would have therefore already known the British education system well. Yet, rather than challenge or reject the system, Beryl abides by the rules and adopts a strict routine to enable her to devote time to her studies.

Beryl's later ambition to study for an 'Open University degree in Humanities and

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, pp.7-8

¹⁸⁷ Lima, p.61

Social Science' demands a similar retreat into private domestic spaces¹⁸⁸:

At night she went to the shops and bought food [...] She made her family their evening meal, then went into her bedroom to study. The room was too small for a desk and chair. My mum sat on the edge of her bed and splayed her books out around her and read and wrote for her degree.¹⁸⁹

This description of Beryl's daily life again evokes images of the city outside being reduced to small enclosed domestic spaces. Within this world, Beryl's engagement connects with the outside world through her studying. As Michael Perfect's assessment of the Jacobs' family home makes clear, Beryl's navigation of the domestic space generates a form of distance and disjointedness within the family unit: 'The very lack of private space in the house seems to encourage the various members of the family to be as mysterious to each other as possible'.¹⁹⁰ Perfect's contention that 'silences of an [...] intimate, familial nature feature heavily' in the novel encapsulates Beryl's ties to the 'melancholic migrant' figure who strives to integrate and conform to a model of national belonging at the expense of their own happiness.

Beryl's conscientious assimilative approach has problematic implications for Angela, who is surprised to be in the 'company of so many black people' when she visits a salon to have her hair straightened¹⁹¹: 'I felt pale in this company, out of place, as white here as I felt black among the pasty-faced English'.¹⁹² Lima queries whether Angela's parents 'are to blame' for her lack of belonging in this environment precisely because of the reality of her having spent very little time with black people as part of the family's attempt to adopt a traditionally white 'English' way of life. I would go as far as to argue that Angela's parents are in fact complicit in enshrining certain racist hierarchies. In an earlier scene, Angela and her brother are playing

¹⁸⁸ Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, p.8

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁹⁰ Michael Perfect, 'Existing in More than Once Plane of Time: Memory and Narrative Form in *Every Light in the House Burnin'*' in *Andrea Levy, (Eds.) Jeannette Baxter and David James* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 41

¹⁹¹ Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, p.166

¹⁹² *Ibid*

rounders in the yard on the council estate on which the Jacobs family live when they are verbally abused by other local children with explicitly racist slurs: 'You wanna go back, coming over here. You wanna go back – go back to where you came from – Blackie [...] Nig-nogs – nig-nogs going back to the jungle'.¹⁹³ Beryl's response to Angela's subsequent distress and tears is to repeatedly tell her to 'take no notice' and 'play by yourself'.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, the extent to which Angela's parents encourage their children to '[k]eep yourself to yourself' extends to a denial of their racial heritage in an attempt to avoid being singled out. As Beryl insistently communicates to Angela, '[y]ou're not black and you're not white'.¹⁹⁵ Such a renunciation of the family's racial identity derives from Beryl's awareness of the racism entrenched in the postcolonial British society in which she finds herself. In this sense, her silence and urge to get on, albeit quietly, symbolise a strategy for survival in a city plagued with prejudice.

The distinction between Beryl's approach to the surrounding city and that of her daughters is worth noting. While Winston and Beryl's silence emerges as a motif which Angela repeatedly returns to, their daughter's 'second-generation' voice articulates a different construction of belonging:

I knew this society better than my parents. My parents' strategy was to keep as quiet as possible in the hope that no one would know that they had sneaked into the country. They wanted to be no bother at all. But I had grown up in its English ways. I could confront it, rail against it, fight it, because it was mine – a birthright.¹⁹⁶

Winston and Beryl's desire 'to be no bother at all' neatly summarises Ahmed's work on the 'melancholic migrant' and denotes a generational attitude towards integration. The contrast between Beryl's silence and Angela's rousing declaration of her 'birthright[s]', an entitlement to the city in which she was born and raised, captures the intergenerational shift in attitudes towards London embodied by the mother/daughter relationships presented by the novel. In spite of pursuing a career

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, p.57

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p.59

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p.88

as a teacher in London and completing a degree, Beryl appears most at home in the domestic space in which she can quietly manage her familial home in the absence of the challenges posed to her by the city outside and where she carves out a space to engage with much wider concerns through her studies.

The Politics of Food

Representations of the mothers across the three novels are connected through their role as the family cook and their affiliation with food. There are parallels to be drawn between Beryl, Ida and Carmel in the ways in which they occupy the domestic space, most notably through their provision of food. As Barrington notes in *Mr Loverman*, ‘No one can beat Carmel’s culinary skills’, and all three mothers are often depicted in the kitchen preparing meals for their families.¹⁹⁷ In this section, I explore the trope of food as a mechanism for understanding Beryl’s and Ida’s performances of self in domestic spaces. Traditional cultural depictions of the mother figure connect women’s natural and biological capacity to nurture with providing sustenance and feeding. In this sense, the symbolic significance of the notion of mothers’ intimate relationship to the cooking and serving of food in the domestic realm may appear to be exhausted and stereotypical. In challenging this assumption, I would argue that Evans’, Evaristo’s and Levy’s presentation of food as a central component of family life does not simply contribute to a long tradition within women’s writing but highlights the nuanced ways in which food connects to notions of belonging and unbelonging in diasporic contexts. There is no doubt in my mind that these authors all engage with approaches to food to connect with wider debates around gendered performance and migrant/settler dynamics. All three of the selected novels employ food metaphors to comment upon the mother figures’ relationship with the domestic space and wider sense of belonging in the city.

Beryl’s occupation of small domestic spaces focuses on the kitchen. Angela’s childhood recollections of her family home repeatedly note Beryl’s presence in the

¹⁹⁷ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.41

kitchen: 'My mum spent the morning in the kitchen'.¹⁹⁸ The images that Angela evoke portray everyday domestic scenes in which her mother prepares meals for her family, 'sat at the table peeling potatoes into a pan'.¹⁹⁹ As the commentary above on her mapping of her home makes clear, for the most part, Beryl actively pursues a British way of life which bolsters her strategy to 'fit in'. Yet, in the kitchen, Beryl nostalgically connects with her Jamaican roots through cooking. Food emerges as a tool through which Beryl can repeatedly perform a version of her Jamaican self and the novel summons vivid depictions of the typically Jamaican food which she prepares: 'She boiled rice in coconut with beans. She spiced chicken and meat until it was hot. She fried bananas'.²⁰⁰ Cooking Jamaican food in her own kitchen symbolises comfort and security for Beryl. Outside of the domestic space, Beryl's mediation of self through food is disorientated. During a family holiday to Pontins holiday park, a straight-forward question asking what she would like to drink triggers unease and hesitation:

[...] 'well, what you want then, Mum?'
 My mum looked around her again, then leant forward,
 closer to my dad. 'I don't know – what they have?'
 'Anything,' Yvonne said.
 'Well, I'll have. . .' My mum paused. 'I'll have...'
 'Have a cola, Mum. That's what I'm going to have,' I
 suggested.
 'All right, I'll have a cola.'²⁰¹

The scene represents the cultural and social factors which dictate what is consumed and where. Beryl's repeated 'look[ing] around', assessing her surroundings, denotes a self-consciousness around ordering the 'right' drink to not appear at odds with the setting. Beryl's anxiety again derives from an urge to assimilate into the 'English' environment embodied by place such as Pontins. The cultural connotations attached to food and drink are again marked through intergenerational differences. The confidence with which Angela reaches a decision on what she wants to drink is further emphasised by her mother's uncertainty; recognising the awkwardness the

¹⁹⁸ Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, p.118

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p.86

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p.45

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, pp.76-77

question provokes, Angela persuades Beryl to imitate her by ordering a 'cola', rendering the decision easier for her mother. Beryl's confidence around the preparation and provision of food she knows in the privacy of her own home is derailed by an exposure to an unfamiliar cultural context. While Jamaican cuisine is inextricably tied to Beryl's definition of home, she struggles to establish her relationship to food and drink in the world beyond the domestic space.

Beryl's loyalty to Jamaican cuisine emerges as a source of contention between the mother and daughter as Angela reveals her preference for school dinners: 'I loved school dinners. I looked forward to them every day'.²⁰² Angela feels embarrassed by her mother's cooking in its incapacity to conform to 'normative' ideas of food in the environment in which she is being raised: 'But *my* mum cooked different things [...] Everything she made tasted different'.²⁰³ Githire's study on food politics, as presented by Levy's novels analyses the mother and daughter's differing tastes as a sign of their cultural belonging:

Beryl Jacobs's cooking becomes the source of much anxiety and frustration for her daughter. Significantly, the questing subject is both constituted and transformed in subtle moments of contact that frame the discourse of national identity in relation to cultural practices with particular attention to eating habits.²⁰⁴

Githire's theory provides a lens through which to examine Angela's relationship to her mother's food in perpetuating certain racial and cultural stereotypes which she endeavours to breakdown within her peer group.

The tension around 'cultural practices' relating to food which underpin the mother/daughter relationship culminates when Sonia, Angela's school friend, is invited to have dinner at the Jacobs' flat:

I watched her prod at the brown stewed meat.

²⁰² *Ibid*, p.44

²⁰³ *Ibid*, p.45

²⁰⁴ Njeri Githire, 'The Empire Bites Back: Food Politics and the Making of a Nation in Andrea Levy's Works, *Callaloo*, 33:3 (2010) [<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/396777>], p.862

‘My mum says I shouldn’t eat things like this,’ she said.
 [...] ‘It’s nice, Sonia. Go on, try it – try it – it’s just meat. Look.’
 I took a mouthful of stew. We had this a lot at home. A
 spiced stew with rice and peas.
 [...] ‘Urghh, it’s burning my mouth.’ She dropped her fork
 back on to the plate and grabbed for her glass of orange
 squash. ‘I don’t like it,’ she said [...] ‘My mum says I don’t
 have to eat anything I don’t like.’²⁰⁵

Leaving aside Sonia’s narrow-mindedness and unwillingness to try food that she is not necessarily familiar with, the voice of her absent mother in the scene echoes prejudiced and biased views. Sonia’s resorting to the phrase ‘my mum’ represents her attempt to validate her views of the stew. Sonia’s melodramatic reaction to the food put in front of her is a product of xenophobic attitudes inherited from her mother: ‘My mum says I’m not to eat food like this’.²⁰⁶ This interpretation is substantiated by a subsequent scene in which Sonia’s mother probes Angela about the food she eats at home:

‘What else do you eat then?’ she persisted
 ‘Other things,’ I said.
 ‘Like what?’
 I thought. ‘Sausages and that.’
 ‘Ordinary sausages, or special jungle sausages?’ She
 laughed and put her arm around my shoulders and gave
 me a squeeze.
 [...] ‘Sonia says your mum fried bananas and you eat them
 with potatoes – is that true? [...] ‘I thought she was
 making it up.’ She laughed again. ‘We like bananas with
 custard.’²⁰⁷

The passive aggression underlying Sonia’s mother’s hugging of Angela and repeated laughing acts as a tactic to distract from the offensiveness of what she is implying. The patronising tone of her laugh is emphasised by the timing of it, deployed as a means of deescalating the tension of her explicitly racist comment regarding ‘jungle sausages’. Sonia’s mother’s belittling comments serve to implement a form of

²⁰⁵ Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin’*, p.43

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p.46

hierarchy in which emblems of traditionally British cuisine, such as 'ordinary sausages' and 'custard' trounce 'fried bananas' and spiced stew'. Sonia's mother's treatment of Angela's culinary heritage is abounded with ironies as the exposure of the British to bananas in the first place is tied to colonial history and trade. Ignorance masquerades as knowledge in Sonia's mother's haughty assumption that she knows about how bananas should be served in overlooking the fact that plantain, traditionally served alongside savoury food, needs to be cooked. The scene subverts the universally unifying potential of food to bring people and cultures together. The dialogue instead solidifies the divisions entrenched within the 1970s society in which the novel is set and validates Angela's and Beryl's anxieties around the food that they eat at home.

Angela's anxiety around the cultural connotations attached to food is transferred to Beryl, who encourages her daughter to misconstrue the truth when it comes to communicating what she ate for dinner. When Angela visits Mrs Simpson, the neighbour who lives in the flat above the Jacobs family, Beryl attempts to protect her daughter from the 'exclusion and social stigmatization' attached to food by persuading her to lie about what she has eaten at home.²⁰⁸ Beryl is conscious of the assimilative opportunities made available through food and insists that Angela pretends to have eaten food that Mrs Simpson, who Beryl imagines as representative of homogenous British attitudes towards Jamaican cuisine, is more likely to be familiar with: 'Potatoes and peas. Say you had chicken, potatoes and peas. [...] That's right, good girl. It's not lying, Ange – it's just . . . it's just . . . well, off you go'.²⁰⁹ Similarly to Sonia's mother's allusion to 'ordinary sausages' and 'custard', Beryl encourages Angela to omit the spice or any other peppering of Caribbean flavour from the description of her meals to privilege the 'ordinariness', and in fact, relative blandness, of traditional British dishes. Beryl becomes increasingly aware of the way in which food problematises the image she wishes to present of conforming to national cultural models. Githire corroborates Beryl's position in stating that 'consumption trends are often considered intrinsic components of a

²⁰⁸ Githire, p.868

²⁰⁹ Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, p.134

nation's identity'.²¹⁰ Developing this idea further, Githire cites Pierre Bordieu's work on the social components of taste to argue²¹¹:

Recognizing in taste the capacity to unite and separate individuals, Bourdieu stresses taste's intuitive ability to connect those who belong to similar backgrounds, solely by differentiating them from all others. In this way, taste is intimately bound to mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and not belonging.²¹²

My analysis of Sonia's mother's judgement of Angela's home cuisine in relation to the potential in food to simultaneously unify and divide subjects and wider communities reverberates through this statement. Githire's commentary points to the complex rendering of food in *Every Light in the House Burnin'* as both a comforting and nostalgic symbol of cultural heritage and a source of tension and segregation. Githire's paper summarises Levy's representation of food by suggesting that it exposes 'eating patterns as manifesting deeper, more complicated concerns'.²¹³ Such an assertion provides a constructive framework through which to read Ida's relationship with food in Evans' *26a*.

I offer an extended analysis of Ida's belonging and un-belonging in Chapter Four of this thesis. Nevertheless, it would be reductive to overlook the ways in which Ida's eating habits intersect with her wider negotiation of London as her physical home and Nigeria as her imaginative home. Taking into account *26a*'s presentation of the implications that Ida's volatile mental health have upon her imagining of Nigeria, I would argue that her inclinations to food embody the 'deeper, more complicated concerns' which Githire's study refers to. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Four, Ida embodies an in-between-ness which gives the 'the impression – the quietness, the sideways look – of someone who was always leaving and had never fully arrived'.²¹⁴ Ida's relationship to Nigeria manifests itself in the summoning of

²¹⁰ Githire, p.857

²¹¹ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Trans.) Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984)

²¹² Githire, p.857

²¹³ *Ibid*, p.869

²¹⁴ Evans, *26a*, p.18

her mother, Nne-Nne, and other spirits and she appears to be most at home existing between the imaginative world she creates in her mind and the domestic space she has cultivated in London: '[...] mostly she stayed in, wrapped up, shaded, talking to Nne-Nne who often made her laugh'.²¹⁵ In her review of *26a*, Caroline Birch asserts that 'Mother Ida pines for her native Nigeria'²¹⁶. Birch's assessment omits a consideration of the more nuanced and psychologically complex rendering of Nigeria which the novel evokes. At the same time, this reading of Ida's 'pining' for Nigeria provides a platform from which to examine the reader's first impression of this mother character and her navigation of the domestic space in the novel.

Food offers Ida an opportunity to connect with her Nigerian past. Nostalgia for Nigeria is made evident through food and Ida can often be found 'sitting down to eat at the kitchen table as if she'd forgotten everyone else in the other room. She'd chuckle with Nne-Nne between mouthfuls and if anyone else came into the room the laughter would stop'.²¹⁷ The intimate relationship between food and family manifests itself here in the comfort Ida finds in conjuring images of sharing food with her mother. Similarly to Beryl, Ida's cultural heritage manifests itself in her tastes, as her daughters note, 'she preferred everything stewed – fried up, mushy, with added beans and chilli'.²¹⁸ Likewise, Beryl and Ida both feel the cold and the image of Ida 'wrapped up' in the family home resonates in Angela's description of Beryl in *Every Light in the House Burnin'*: 'My mum was always cold, she never warmed up. [...] She never took her coat off – she would cook or wash or sit, all in her outside coat'.²¹⁹ Such presentations of the mothers allude to their origins in warmer climates and their lifelong struggle to adjust to the inclement London weather. Evans' presentation of Ida's inclinations to food resists such a simplified analysis and instead reveal a ceremonial approach to the preparation and consumption of food.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.18

²¹⁶ Carol Birch, '26a by Diana Evans: Love and Death in Neasden', *The Independent*, 25 March 2005 [<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/26a-by-diana-evans-757497.html>]

²¹⁷ Evans, *26a*, p. 18

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.18

²¹⁹ Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, p.7

As the novel's twins suggest, Ida's routines around food distinguish her from the rest of the family and shift traditional familial dynamics of gathering around a table at the same time to share a meal: 'Ida was usually the last to finish eating because her food was special'.²²⁰ Her rituals extend to the warming of all the food she consumes:

[...] because Ida often felt cold, what she ate had to be warm, preferably hot. She warmed everything up, including salad, cake, bread, cheese, coleslaw, Safeway's blackcurrant cheesecakes (which she was particularly fond of and got agitated if Aubrey forgot to buy them), apples, biscuits and ice-cream, until it was almost but not quite liquid.²²¹

Ida's preference for 'hot' food could again be interpreted as symbolic of a craving for the warmer climate of Nigeria. I would argue that the depiction of Ida's rituals around food are more complex and symbolise an assertion of self which she struggles to secure elsewhere in her life. Food, for Ida, is both a pleasure and a process. Like her imaginative exchanges with Nne-Nne, food offers a form of escapism from the everyday realities of an unhappy marriage with Aubrey and the un-belonging she feels in the real world. Ida's preparation of food equally performs a version of herself which is more spiritual and ritualistic.

The twins' description of their mother's preparation of a roast chicken, which she cooks only for 'special occasions', details the meticulousness Ida applies to her cooking:

[...] when it came to chicken, Ida was beyond the teachings of any book. Ida knew what to do with chicken. She did not seem to add much seasoning, nor did she cram the insides with year-round stuffing or cloves of garlic. Bel and the Little Ones believed that Ida spoke to the chicken. As she basted it with oil in the sunlounge and sprinkled the skin with mysterious grains, she bent and whispered, you are delicious, you are tender, you are the chicken of kings and queens. And the chicken obeyed. It swelled and juiced in the oven on its journey to food, it gathered in its flesh all the bliss and passion

²²⁰ Evans, *26a*, p.16

²²¹ *Ibid*, p.18

of taste and fell lusciously into their mouth brown and moist and holy.²²²

The extract encapsulates Evans' powerful command of language, evoking synesthetic descriptions of the smells, textures and taste of the roast chicken which anticipate the twins' mouth-watering reaction to the eating of it. The deployment of words such as 'flesh', 'passion' and 'holy' evoke a religious dimension which implies a form of worship to Ida's cooking and reinforces the ceremonial treatment of the bird. The young children's clear affection and appetite for their mother's cooking is tangible. While their exaggerated account of the process conveys a certain fabrication of stories which children are prone to, the ceremony performed on the chicken reinforces Ida's connecting with her Nigerian heritage through cooking. Evans' novel continually vacillates between the real and spiritual worlds and repeated allusions to Nigerian folktales and myths cement an element of the mystical within the narrative. As Jane Bryce notes, the novel cultivates a form of 'realism that bears the trace of preexisting nonrealist modes of expression and belief'.²²³ Ida's treatment of the chicken conveys the ways in which she comfortably occupies the spiritual realm and draws upon otherworldly inspiration. Her children's interpretation of Ida's 'whispering' to the chicken symbolises their belief in her power to call upon a spirituality connected to her Nigerian past through the medium of food.

Far from simply reinforcing clichéd images of the mother figure caught in the kitchen, Levy's and Evans' presentations of their mother characters' eating habits and cooking patterns reveals a politics of food which exposes internalised pleasures, anxieties and performances of self. As Githire rightly asserts, literary representations of food 'have constituted major lenses through which issues of trans-national/diasporic belonging, as well as the multicultural, race and gender nexus are problematized'.²²⁴ An engagement with Beryl's and Ida's relationship to food has exposed the ways in which the intersection of race, gender and nationality

²²² *Ibid*, p. 16

²²³ Jane Bryce, "Half and Half Children': Third Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel', *Research in African Literature*, 39:2 (2008) [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20109578>], p.64

²²⁴ Githire, p.858

contribute to constructions of home within the domestic sphere, but equally the wider city in which they live.

Re-Mapping Public and Private Spaces

Representations of public and private spaces presented by the selected novels solidify the fact that a definitive sense of place does not exist. The location-specific readings of extracts from this group of authors' texts, within both public and private spheres, reinforces the diversity of versions of London, depending on a subject's engagement with it. I would argue that *26a's*, *Every Light in the House is Burnin's* and *Mr Loverman's* depictions of public London places and private domestic spaces are subversive. The selected novels share an agenda in dismantling hegemonic definitions of London places to expose the ways in which factors such as gender, race, sexual orientation and cultural background frame a subject's experiences of it. Evans' recalibrates presentations of Soho through a gendered mapping of an area often celebrated for its inclusiveness. The analysis of Bessi's experiences serves to emphasise the re-mapping of London which these novels present, destabilising a single definitive sense of London.

While *26a's* presentation of Soho challenges homogenous depictions of the place as a safe haven for non-conforming subjects, *Mr Loverman* challenges portrayals of the domestic space as a sanctuary for the mother figure. The authors' presentation of the tension between place and space comments upon gendered conventions which prevail in both public and private contexts. Bessi's aspirations to render herself physically and professionally mobile through her gendered performance at Digger's, to 'conquer the world', as she puts it, are temporarily immobilised by 'the spotter's' treatment of her body. 'The spotter's' eyes, which I have interpreted as a symbol of wider patriarchal systems, are appropriated in the *Mr Loverman's* scenes in the bedroom and at Heathrow Airport, in which Barrington, within the seeming comfort and security of the institution of marriage, critiques and criticises his wife's body as an object.

It is productive to note that the male characters of the selected novels are most commonly presented in stationary positions and in the case of Aubrey and Winston, the father characters in *26a* and *Every Light in the House is Burnin'* respectively, in their armchairs.²²⁵ Their physical stillness is accentuated by the fact that their eyes appear to be actively assessing the women character's movements around them. The confidence and authority embodied by the still and often seated positions of the men in the novels, contrasts with for example, the nervous energy presented by Bessi's hurrying around Digger's and Beryl's struggling back from the shops with two bags of food on either arm. The physical mobility of the women characters serves to emphasise the lack of professional, educational and social opportunities made available to women through the spaces that they occupy. A comparative analysis of Bessi's mapping of Soho and the mother figures' mapping of domestic spaces foregrounds the ways in which women's movements are frequently circumscribed in relation to their gendered duties, for example, as mothers, wives or waiters, under the surveillance of their male counter-parts.

In the next chapter, I continue to query the specific ways in which a subject's racial, gendered, social and sexual identity shapes their experience of the city. In developing this chapter's examination of performed identities, I call into question the relationship between a subject's 'interiority' and the images they project to the outside world. The chapter considers cases of 'passing' in Levy's *Never Far from Nowhere* and Evaristo's *Mr Loverman* to explore the strategies deployed by the novel's protagonists in their efforts to avoid being defined on the basis of limiting identity-categories.

²²⁵ See Evans, *26a*, p.39 and Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, p.7

Chapter Three

Passing:**Racial, Cultural and Sexual Transformation in Andrea Levy's *Never Far from Nowhere* and Bernardine Evaristo's *Mr Loverman***

According to American literary scholar, Gayle Ward, 'passing' constitutes 'the transgression of the categories through which subjects are socially compelled to "see" themselves'.²²⁶ Historically, passing has exposed the inherent contradictions of socially constructed and imposed categories of identity on the human body. Passing calls into question the fixedness of racial and gendered identity categories, querying the extent to which these characteristics are biological inherited and to what extent they are determined by a societal inclination to conform and classify. Ward suggests that cases of 'crossing the line' challenge dominant racial discourses attached to the white/black dyad, defining it as 'a practice that emerges from subjects' desires to control the terms of their racial definition'.²²⁷ While a substantial amount of work exists on representations of passing within African-American narratives, specifically in relation to literature of the Harlem Renaissance, British writers' engagement with modes of passing, have not often been read within this context.

This chapter is divided into two parts, the first of which explores Andrea Levy's literary representation of two sisters' 'passing' across the lines of culture, race and class in her early novel, *Never Far from Nowhere*. It focuses on extracts written from the different perspectives of the two protagonists, Olive and Vivien, sisters of Jamaican heritage, raised in 1970s north London. The sisters' starkly different experiences of the city expose the cultural signifiers attached to blackness. The colour of their skin signals their visible difference from each other, but equally reveals the impact race has on an individual's interaction with the city and its inhabitants. Foregrounding discourses on passing within a British literary context,

²²⁶ Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century US Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p.186

²²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 6

the discussion considers new forms of crossing the line to query characteristics of race as fixed or secure and to explore the aspirational, transformative and transgressive possibilities which passing makes available.

The second section of the chapter engages with the representation of sexual passing in Bernardine Evaristo's novel, *Mr Loverman*. The analysis centres around Evaristo's protagonist, seventy-four year old Antiguan-born Hackney resident Barrington Walker. Reading Barrington as a passing subject provides an opportunity to assess Evaristo's presentation of his motivation for disguising a lifelong secret affair with his 'friend', Morris, to live as a heterosexual married man with his wife, Carmel. Set predominately in present-day Hackney, East London, an area generally perceived as progressive and liberal in its outlook, the novel calls into question cultural labelling of sexual orientations. My analysis focuses on the intrinsic relationship between sexuality and social and cultural conventions attached to gender roles. Specifically, taking into account Barrington's generational and cultural attitudes, I examine the novel's interrogation of the entanglement of hyper-masculinity with heterosexuality.

Passing:

Racial and Cultural Transformation in Andrea Levy's *Never Far from Nowhere*

*I sighed to myself. I wanted to be from somewhere he would be interested in, not just prejudiced against.*²²⁸

The notion of passing pertains to the fluidity and un-fixedness of identity through a subject's potential to carefully construct and perform his/her preferred race, ethnicity or gender. Passing occurs when a member of one community is able to manipulate visibly distinguishing codes that enable acceptance and assimilation into an identity category different from their own, confusing the givenness of surface facts and identity labels. As Jessica Lingel asserts, 'the act of passing' enables an individual to 'assume (either actively or passively) membership within multiple communities'.²²⁹ Historical cases of passing were most commonly organised by Americans of mixed racial ancestry, who 'passed' as white to mobilise themselves through binary racial boundaries in eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century American society. In most cases, passing required an individual to have physical features commonly recognised as Caucasian to enable him/her to perform whiteness and assimilate into white communities. The concept of passing is habitually associated with social and economic mobility. Butler's remark that passing enables 'a class mobility afforded by whiteness' is corroborated by a European and North American history that traces the privileges accrued to those who are recognised as white.²³⁰ Slavery's prominence in shaping the United States' economic and social development is widely recognised as plantation economies, particularly pervasive in the South in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were built exclusively on white land owner's exploitation of individuals of African origins and depended upon racial hierarchies that aligned whiteness with prerogative authority.²³¹ Within this context, the systematic association of

²²⁸ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.136

²²⁹ Jessica Lingel, 'Adjusting the Borders: Bisexual Passing and Queer Theory', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 9:3-4 (2009) [<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15299710903316646>], p. 382

²³⁰ Butler, 'Passing, Queering; Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge' in *Bodies that Matter* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), p.125

²³¹ See Acharya Avidit, Matthew Blackwell and Maya Sen, 'The Political Legacy of American Slavery', *Journal of Politics*, 78 (2016) pp.621-641

whiteness with rationality and blackness with ‘otherness’, cultivated an opposition of white and black that was crucial to the system for extracting labour, managing the plantation and justifying the extraction of labour and yet, ironically, the rapid emergence of a ‘mulatto’ class provided visible evidence of the porosity of the boundary between black and white.

Discourses on passing convey the relationship between race and socioeconomic circumstance. Contemporary anthropological researchers have noted that passing as white continues to bring about certain socioeconomic opportunities not historically available to the African-American community. Emily Nix and Nancy Qian’s study investigates historical cases of passing to understand wider socioeconomic circumstances that present it as an attractive prospect and explore some of the tangible advantages of passing as white:

Sometimes, individuals passed to obtain a job or attend school, and then later pass back. [...] Other times, circumstances would force one who has passed as white to pass back to being black. For example, Williams (1996) discusses how alcoholism, divorce and the loss of his business forced his father to move himself and his children back to his childhood home, where he returned to his black identity and told his children for the first time that they were not white.²³²

Nix and Qian’s research summarises the physical and economic mobility associated with passing. In the case of Williams, passing as white symbolised socioeconomic ascent and passing back to being black symbolised a form of socioeconomic regression. Nix and Qian contextualise this dynamic within familial settings by comparing the psychological implications of race in siblings raised in the same household: ‘Mill and Stein (2012) find that amongst mixed-race siblings, those that identify as white later in life earn significantly higher wages’.²³³ Narratives of passing expose often very pragmatic and tactical manipulations of race to re-direct and alter forestalled life trajectories, emphasising the influence of race and ethnicity

²³² Emily Nix and Nancy Qian, *The Fluidity of Race: “Passing” in the United States, 1880-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p.15

²³³ *Ibid* p.1

variables on social status and an individual sense of 'place' in the world. Passing manifests itself as both a form of self-advancement and a strategy for survival. In this chapter I argue that far from simply a denial of race, passing emerges as a simultaneously productive and problematic trope for challenging and disrupting society's incessant need to indorse superficial identity categories.

African-American theorisation on passing, specifically in relation to the literature that arose from the Harlem Renaissance in the early-mid twentieth century remains highly pertinent. Nella Larsen's novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, made profound contributions to discourses around crossing racial and cultural lines. Born in Chicago in 1891 to a Danish mother and an Afro-Caribbean father, Larsen's life was underpinned by an acute awareness of the significance of the colour line.²³⁴ In his biography of the author, George Hutchinson recognises that, 'like her most important fictional characters, she nearly always inhabited the space between black and white, by necessity and by choice'.²³⁵ Larsen's subject is the 'tragic mulatta' – a mythical and romanticised representation of a woman of inter-racial parentage who is burdened with the perpetual negotiation of her juxtaposed white self and black self in an explicitly racist society.²³⁶ Larsen's representation is one that queries the markers of race through light-skinned women characters' capacity to pass as white, but also points to the question of the mixed-race and black woman's body as a site of complex subjectivity.

Larsen's only novels, *Quicksand*, first published in 1928, and *Passing*, first published in 1929, emerged from the Harlem Renaissance literary movement at a time when passing became an increasingly explored theme in African-American literature. Through her semi-autobiographical portrayals of Helga Crane, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, women of interracial parentage, Larsen represented mixed-race women characters negotiating the polarities of black and white on 1920s American social spectrums, repeatedly performing versions of their racial and gendered selves

²³⁴ See Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1994)

²³⁵ George Hutchinson, 'Introduction' in *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2006), p.9

²³⁶ See Emily Clark, 'The Tragic Mulatto and Passing' in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp.259-270

in the hope of securing a sense of belonging in one community. In both *Quicksand*, and *Passing*, Larsen's characters inhabit a liminal world. In *Quicksand*, Helga continuously and unsuccessfully searches for a home throughout the United States and Europe – as well as travelling to Copenhagen to trace her matrilineal Danish heritage, she spends time in Tuskegee in Alabama, Chicago and Harlem, searching for her community, her people. Helga's narrative of passing is an ambivalent one; despite enabling her to move across social hierarchies and across geographies, the very fact that she is compelled to pass demonstrates an inability to reconcile the black and white components of her identity, compounding her sense of displacement. Whilst in Copenhagen, living as a white European, listening to two black men perform an 'old ragtime song that Helga remembered as a child' elicits 'urgent longings' to return to an Africa-American community.²³⁷ The performance of the song evokes an emotional reaction in Helga, who becomes resentful about the white audience's consumption of black culture and feels uneasy about the 'cavorting Negroes' on stage:

Instead she was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on stage. She felt ashamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget.²³⁸

In this episode Larsen exposes the politics of seeing and being seen for passing subjects. The complicated regimes of seeing are at play in Helga's anxiety around her own 'blackness' becoming visible to the 'pink and white' spectators who may recognise resonances between her and the 'Negroes' on stage. As the scene unfolds, Helga becomes more self-conscious of others noticing her affinity with the singers and seeing the 'black' in her. The moment forces Helga to understand her Danish self in a new way, recognising a stronger sense of solidarity and connection with the black singers than her fellow audience members and at the same time, epitomises the tensions underpinning passing subjects' fear of being 'seen' and subsequently exposed.

²³⁷ Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (London: Serpent's Tale, 2010), p.82

²³⁸ *Ibid*, p.83

Larsen grants voice and psychological complexity to women characters who are bound by the entangled practices of sexism and racism. Querying the relationship between race and other social factors was radical in its time and on first reading *Quicksand*, W.E.B. Du Bois was struck by Larsen's comprehension of the 'curious cross currents that swirl about the Black American'.²³⁹ His comments encapsulate Larsen's capacity to convey the intricate intermingling of questions of race with class, gender and sexuality. Cheryl Wall further notes the author's eagerness to highlight the inevitable, but often overlooked, intersection of race and gender:

Quicksand and *Passing* contemplate the inextricability of the racism and sexism which confront the black woman in her quest for a wholly integrated identity [...] Larsen's most striking insights are into the psychic dilemmas confronting certain black women.²⁴⁰

Larsen's representation of black women was pioneering, demanding more nuanced and multifarious readings of the racial and gendered variations that shape identity.

In what follows, I extend ideas around passing that derive from Larsen's work and African-American literary criticism by applying them to Levy's 1996 novel, *Never Far from Nowhere*. Contextualising ideas around 'crossing the line' within Levy's London enables a consideration of distinctive forms of passing that are a product of and unique to the time and place in which they occur. In this case, I am interested in exploring manifestations of passing in Levy's 'working-class' north London setting to reflect upon socially mobile opportunities made available through passing. I wish to appropriate Matthew Pratt Guterl's critique of cases of passing in Modern America to Levy's London, interrogating his assertion that passing enables 'advancement up the social ladder':

[...] passing narratives expose the unpredictable, historically contingent qualities of race, even as they demonstrate the power of socioeconomic structures to shape human possibilities. Racial passing, in short, was

²³⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, 'Two Novels', *Crisis*, XXXV (1928), p. 202

²⁴⁰ Cheryl A. Wall, 'Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels', *Black American Literature Forum*, 20 (1986), p. 98

a matter of desperate advancement up the social ladder.²⁴¹

In my analysis of Levy's representation of Olive and Vivien, I develop Guterl's idea of passing's capacity to 'shape human possibilities' to assess the relationship between race and social progress. Attending to Levy's representation of sisters, Olive and Vivien, I analyse the relationship between blackness and social and cultural influences, querying the impact that race has on the everyday lives of two black sisters, one lighter-skinned than the other, living in social housing in Finsbury Park.

Socially Mobile Passing

Never Far from Nowhere, is distinguished from its renowned sequel, *Small Island*, by a markedly more intimate, autobiographical tone and a less historically encyclopaedic scope in its focus on one family. The structure of the novel grants voice to Levy's protagonists, sisters Olive and Vivien, through chapters narrated in the first-person by each sister alternatively. Olive and Vivien map their London, a space that encompasses the social housing, youth clubs and local pubs of 1970s north London that they occupy. This imagining of the city is informed by Levy's own experiences of growing up in north London, as the following makes clear:

I lived on a council estate in north London. I went to a local school. Spoke like a good cockney. I played outside with all the white kids who lived around my way – rounders, skipping and hide and seek. I ate a lot of sweets. Watched a lot of television: *Coronation Street*, *Emergency Ward 10*. Loved the Arsenal. Hated Tottenham Hotspur. I lived the life of an ordinary London working-class girl.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Matthew Pratt Guterl, 'Passing' in *Seeing Race in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), p.172

²⁴² Andrea Levy, 'Back to My Own Country: An Essay' in *Six Stories & an Essay* (London: Tinder Press, 2014), p.5

Levy's own experiences are mediated in the character of Vivien, the younger and lighter-skinned sister. It is evident from Levy's account of growing up in north London that there are intimate similarities between her and Vivien's experiences: she too attended a north London Grammar school, pursued a diploma at art college, has Jamaican ancestry and 'fairer' skin. In the opening pages of the text Vivien notes the differentiating physical feature between her and Olive - the colour of their skin:

But I had a light skin – a high colour. In a dim light I could be taken for Italian or Spanish. Olive was darker. Black. The Caribbean legacy [...] The Caribbean legacy left me with fair skin and black wavy hair. And Olive with black skin, a head of tight frizzy hair streaked with red, and green eyes.²⁴³

The 'high colour' of her skin that Vivien refers to here connects with Levy's essay, 'Back to My Own Country', in which she addresses the significance of lighter skin within a postcolonial Caribbean context:

My family is fair-skinned. In Jamaica this had had a big effect on my parents' upbringing, because of the class system, inherited from British colonial times [...] My parents had grown up to believe themselves of a higher class than any darker-skinned person. [...] it seemed perfectly normal to me that the colour of your skin was one of the most important things about you. White people of course never had to think about it. But if you were not white, well then, how black were you? I accepted all of this as logical. That was how I would be judged.²⁴⁴

Levy's parents' interpretation of race exists within a diasporic London community that paradoxically mimics the snobbery and superciliousness entrenched within British colonial systems in the Caribbean. As Levy insinuates, such attitudes embedded a meta-hierarchy, in the sense that the experience of diaspora exaggerated the racial hierarchies of the homeland within immigrant communities who were attempting to assimilate into a society anxious and fearful of the influx of post-war migrants. Levy's parents exploited their lighter skin to survive in a fragile

²⁴³ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, pp.1-2

²⁴⁴ Levy, 'Back to My Own Country: An Essay', p.8

and precarious postcolonial environment that favoured an empirical inclination to conform.

Within *Never Far from Nowhere*, Levy ventriloquises her own parents' views on race through the character of Rose Charles, Olive and Vivien's mum, who aligns race with class. Social hierarchies attached to the lightness of skin are upheld by Rose, who 'tried to believe that she was not black [...] she liked to think that because they were fair-skinned they were the only decent people who came [to England from Jamaica]. The only ones with a bit of class.'²⁴⁵ Rose, like Levy's parents, maintains attitudes, specific to the colonised Caribbean and intensified in a city that, at the time, defined race in a way in which oriented the supremacy of lighter skin. Typical of her style, Levy deploys humour to offset the bleakness of Rose's outlook and the harshness of expressing these opinions with her darker-skinned daughter, Olive:

She used to talk to me about what she thought of black people here [...] telling me how they were like this and like that – nothing good of course. But she sat looking in my black face telling me. And I thought if anyone looking at us sitting at this table talking had to describe the scene, they'd say, 'There are two black women talking.' But my mother thought that we weren't black.²⁴⁶

Rose's conceptualisation of 'blackness' is inherited from a colonial past and is intensified when transplanted to the mother country which, even after the end of Empire, perpetually 'othered' the non-white subject. As Errol Lawrence's examination of 1970s British society, suggests, 'The alien cultures of the blacks [were] seen as either the cause of or else the most visible symptom of the destruction of the British way of life'.²⁴⁷ Vivien senses this hostile atmosphere from a young age: 'But even when I was young, when I was still having my cheek pulled by passers-by and people winked at me on the tube, even then I knew that English people hated us'.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.7

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.7

²⁴⁷ Errol Lawrence, 'Just Plain Common Sense: The Roots of Racism' in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, (Ed.) Paul Gilroy (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p.48

²⁴⁸ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.5

Rose's 'first-generation' understanding of the relationship between race and social positioning permeates the 'second-generation' lives of Olive and Vivien, both born and raised in London. An awareness of the social factors attached to racial identities is inherited by both sisters in strikingly contrasting ways. I wish to firstly utilise Guterl's idea of 'class passing' to read Vivien's mobility in two different social settings: a local north London pub and a classroom accommodating a predominately white, middle-class cohort at art college.²⁴⁹

The first extract is taken from a chapter narrated by Vivien in which she recalls a Friday night spent with her two school friends, Georgina and Helena, in The Kings Arms, a local pub near Highbury and Islington station. Vivien draws the attention of one of the band-members, Eddie, who is performing in the pub that evening. Prior to the start of this extract, Georgina and Helena go to the bar, leaving Vivien and Eddie at the table to become acquainted:

'Just me and you then, Vivien,' Eddie smiled. He took a sip of my drink.
 'Where you from?' he asked, not changing his expression or tone at all.
 I sighed to myself. I wanted to be from somewhere he would be interested in, not just prejudiced against.
 'Mauritius,' I said.
 'Oh yeah,' he said, frowning a little. 'Doesn't that mean you speak French?' I hadn't thought of that.
 'Well, I don't,' I invented fast. 'But my parents do...my grandparents did.'
 'Is it nice there?'
 'I haven't been.'
 'Sounds nice, sounds exotic, full of girls in grass skirts. Where is it, then?'
 I didn't know. 'Oh I'm not sure...somewhere...it's been a long time, you know.'
 'Well I wish I was from somewhere,' he laughed. And I said, 'I was born in this country.'
 'Oh well, you're a Londoner then, like me.' He took another sip of my drink, and saw me staring at it.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ Guterl, pp. 168-181

²⁵⁰ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.136

In this traditionally white, 'English' pub setting, Vivien enacts a form of passing by making the conscious decision to deny her Jamaican ancestry and instead pose as Mauritian. In choosing to pass as Mauritian, Vivien renders herself even more exotic and not British at all, revealing an ignorance and lack of interest in her colonial history which ironically renders her more typically 'English'. She appears to be so determined to detach herself from connotations associated with being Jamaican in a British context that she selects a place that has little or no connection with Britain (even via language) in the way that Jamaica does. At the same time, Vivien's short, forthright assertion of her Britishness exposes insecurities about her sense of belonging: 'I was born in this country'. Vivien's discomfort about the national identity her visible racial difference appears to preclude echoes Levy's own, and again, the sense of the autobiographical here is resonant: 'I hated myself. I was ashamed of my family, and embarrassed that they came from the Caribbean'.²⁵¹ From Vivien's perspective, to admit to her racial and cultural heritage would be to compromise her potential forging of a relationship with Eddie. Later in the novel, Vivien becomes paranoid about Eddie meeting her mum and sister and her Jamaican heritage being exposed: 'A horrible vision went through my head [...] Eddie turning to my mum and asking her all about the far-off land of Mauritius'.²⁵² Vivien's wish to be 'from somewhere he would be interested in, not just prejudiced against' sharply epitomises her negotiation of 'blackness' in a culture that perceives race according to rigid 'black' and 'white' antitheses.

Levy conveys the chasm between Vivien's thoughts and what she conveys externally by interweaving insights into Vivien's interiority as the dialogue with Eddie is taking-place. Her thoughts convey internalised forms of exoticisation in her ignorance of the geography or culture of Mauritius. Eddie's externalised fetishisation of her body according to the racial and gendered stereotypes conjured in the 'exotic' image of 'girls in grass skirts' is reinforced by the way Vivien sees her own difference as 'other'. Frantz Fanon's work is useful here in rationalising Vivien's construction of her own racial identity. Fanon's influential text, *Black Skin, White Masks* emphasises the ways the black man internalises white racism, again, calling

²⁵¹ Levy, 'Back to My Own Country: An Essay', p.9

²⁵² Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.150

into question the politics of seeing and being seen. His conceptualisation of the way he sees himself ties into the anxieties expressed by Vivien's internal thought processes:

I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white . . . who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization . . . I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.²⁵³

Fanon dramatises the processes by which white supremacy installs its hierarchies through an economy of looking that positions the white woman at its peak. Fanon exposes the way the black man becomes alienated from himself as he is seen, and, in this sense, he expresses his want for what he should not want according to racial hierarchies – 'possessing' a white woman therefore becomes a way of possessing whiteness. Fanon's work, which explicitly engages with notions of racial masking, reinforces the complex dynamic of race and gender which influences Vivien's decision to disguise her Jamaican heritage. Although Fanon focuses exclusively on the black *man*, his analysis of the way in which racism is internalised is equally applicable to a figure such as Vivien.

Notwithstanding Eddie's interrogation of Vivien's cultural and racial heritage, the exoticism he attaches to her appearance is countered by her grounding in London. Eddie identifies Vivien as a Londoner, finding comfort and solidarity in their shared affiliation with the place: 'Oh well, you're a Londoner, [...] like me'. When Vivien leaves London to attend art college in Canterbury, her mapping of the world becomes muddled. The second extract portrays Vivien's first encounters with her peers after arriving late for the first morning of her art course at the University for the Creative Arts in Canterbury. Prior to the start of this extract, Vivien has arrived into the station behind schedule and has run to the university:

²⁵³ **Frantz Fanon**, 'The Man of Color and The White Woman' in *Black Skin, White Masks*, (Trans.) Charles Lam Markman (London: Pluto Press, 1967), p.63

[...] Had I known that as soon as I opened it twenty pairs of students' eyes, female and male, would turn and look at me, I would have patted my hair down and checked my mascara. It was not the entrance I had wanted to make, puffing, sweating and cursing, but I was late.

[...] 'Have a seat – you haven't missed much.' I looked up and around: everyone in the room was smiling at me. I took a seat.

'We were just about to introduce ourselves. So what I want you to do is turn to a neighbour and tell them three interesting things about yourself.' The room tittered collectively. 'Now come on,' Miss Schwartz laughed, 'you must be able to think of just three things.'

It was then I remembered that I hadn't put on any deodorant that morning. I'd packed it the night before and had had such trouble getting my bag shut that I feared opening it again in case everything sprung out like a jack-in-the-box. So I just sprinkled a handful of Johnson's baby talc under each arm. But since then I had sweated. I had really sweated. I slid my hand inside my T-shirt as discreetly as I could, rubbed it round my armpit and pulled it out. I was about to put my fingertips to my nose when someone said 'hello, I'm Victoria, and that is Victoria, not Vicky.'

'Vivien,' I said.

'Vivien not Viv?'

'I don't mind.'

Victoria was a blonde woman with one of those faces that was so pretty it was boring. The sort of faces that if you were asked to draw them you'd just have to put everything in perfect symmetry and it would be a good likeness. Petite, turned-up nose, blue eyes and straight lifeless hair – they all looked the same to me.

[...]

I haven't washed my hair today. Does it look an absolute fright? Go on – tell me the truth.' I stank of BO.

'No,' I said, moving away from her.

'Well, tell me about you. I know your name's Vivien but where are you from?'

'London'.

'Whereabouts?'

I was about to say Finsbury Park, but I looked at Victoria's immaculate red-painted fingernails, her tight, well-fitting jeans with a gold belt running through the loops, her soft pink shirt opening low down her breasts, the delicate gold chain round her neck and gold and pearl stud earrings and said, 'Islington.'

‘Oh Islington – I know it – do you know Frederick’s?
That restaurant in...oh, you know...you know...’

‘Camden Passage,’ I said. I knew Frederick’s well. I used to look at the menu with Carol and we’d recite the dishes – smoked salmon with red peppers and limes, parma ham with figs – and wonder what they tasted like as we ate a big bag of chips walking down Upper Street.

[...]

Miss Schwarz pointed, and then in turn people were introducing Clare, Paul, Margaret, Jim, Ken, Cherry, Graham, Sarah, Chris, Chris, Chris . . . And saying interesting things about horses, gym tournaments, violins, cellos, drama clubs, karate, Japan, brass-rubbing . . . In parts of the country called Esher, Ashford, Virginia Water, Leamington Spa, Spalding, Perthshire, Tokyo and Peas Pottage.²⁵⁴

The scene alarmingly points to the elitist culture of higher-education and raises concerns over the engagement of non-middle class, non-white students in this environment, striking resonance with an episode in Evaristo’s *Mr Loverman* in which Barrington enters a seminar room for his Shakespeare course at Birkbeck, University of London for the first time to be greeted by faces who looked at him in a ‘quizzical’ manner, ‘like maybe I should be redirected to Carnival Studies or something’.²⁵⁵ The sense of feeling ‘out of place’ by both Barrington and Vivien in the separate scenarios exemplifies the intersection of social and cultural trends with the ways in which race is perceived and recognised in different environments.

Vivien’s sense of displacement arises from social and cultural tensions between ‘home’ and this unfamiliar cultural environment. Up until this point in the novel, Vivien has existed solely within a small geographic area in north London – her world is microcosmic – spanning a two-and-a-half-mile area from the Finsbury Park Council Estate on which she lives to Upper Street and Angel. Levy accentuates Vivien’s London-centric perspective by deploying humour which derives from placing quintessentially ‘English’ place names alongside Tokyo, as equally alien to London. At art college, Vivien encounters a world of ‘horses, gym tournaments, violins and cellos’ for the first time and is astonished to meet Victoria, who

²⁵⁴ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, pp. 245-247

²⁵⁵ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.82

personifies this world so compellingly. Victoria is presented in a caricatured style, an embodiment of the predictably pretty, white middle-class woman who typifies images of an art student. In her decision to tell Victoria that she is from Islington, rather than Finsbury Park, Vivien crosses social lines by negating her council estate upbringing and socially mobilising herself.

As white, 'pretty' and young, Victoria conforms to hegemonic ideals of women and Levy deliberately toys with and mocks the banality of her beauty. Vivien's flippant remark, 'they all looked the same to me', replays and parodies white racism in the homogenisation of black bodies. Levy presents the two students as opposites – Victoria's confidence appears even more gregarious in comparison to Vivien's anxious and apprehensive disposition. Victoria's perfectly manicured hands, boringly pretty face and 'flat hair' juxtaposes Vivien's un-deodorized under-arms and non-'patted down' hair. Vivien's self-deprecating reading of the situation further emphasises the differences between the two women, seeing herself as repulsive in contrast to Victoria's sensualised physicality: 'I had sweated. I had really sweated'. The feminine and sexualised image conjured in the description of Victoria's 'well-fitting jeans' and 'soft pink shirt opening low down her breasts', exposing naked skin intensifies the mockery of the pinkness of her shirt, as well as her skin, and contrasts with Vivien's embarrassed and blunt internal realisation: 'I stank of BO'. Vivien appears to relish her body odour in protest of the banality of Victoria's perfection.

Within this passage, Victoria's presumptions regarding Vivien's north London upbringing reinforce certain racial hierarchies which establish middle-class whiteness as normative. Victoria demonstrates a privileged whiteness, engendered by her incapacity to detach her mapping of Islington from Vivien's more traditionally working-class experience of north London. Victoria's reference to Frederick's, a restaurant in Camden Passage, and Vivien's presumed familiarity with it, assumes a particular socio-economic experience of Islington. In response to Victoria's enquiries, Vivien conjures images of this part of London that are more familiar, pondering the dishes on the menu 'as we ate a big bag of chips walking down Upper Street'. The disparity between Vivien's 'bag of chips', invoking

synesthetic whiffs of salt and vinegar combined with the textures of newspaper and wooden forks, conflicts with the image of delicately dainty 'smoked salmon with red peppers and limes' associated with Victoria's visits to Frederick's. The aspirational component attached to Viven and Carol's reciting of the dishes on the menu, wondering 'what they tasted like', further widens the rift between Vivien's and Victoria's respective worlds. While Vivien's encounters with 'parma ham with figs' exist only in an imaginary realm, Victoria's reality reflects a lifestyle that is far more accustomed to weekend lunches at institutions such as Frederick's. The disparate depictions of food and the connotations attached to it evoke a form of social hierarchy dictated by what is eaten and where, reinforcing the striking differences between their upbringings.

The two selected extracts make use of the tension between stated, external speech and an interior, unspoken corrective to that speech. Levy's approach to passing echoes the tension of seeing and being seen in that the text suggests that there is a powerful alternative reality pulsing away beneath the surface interactions that the novel is constructed around. There is a strong social dimension in both extracts and Vivien's internal dialogues reveal her strategies to mobilise herself both within and outside of her north London microcosm. Various factors including Vivien's light-skin, friendship group at school and inclination to art build a narrative which reflects the inextricability of race and class in a way in which exemplifies Guterl's assertion 'that only the very best and very lightest, or the luckiest, should be granted the chance to become, performatively, white'.²⁵⁶ The ambiguity attached to Vivien's racial identity enables her to defy socioeconomic structures to transgress rigid categories that too often determine a subject's potential and future. She manipulates the relationship between race and social progress to deploy 'racial sight as an instrument of personal liberation' and shape the ways in which others see her to 'cross' racial and social lines.²⁵⁷ Vivien's negotiation of race exposes the possibilities and perils of passing. While the autonomy she exercises in her manipulation and performance of racial identity appears empowering, she is compelled to rely upon passing as the principal means through which to mobilise herself.

²⁵⁶ Guterl, p.166

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p.173

Vivien's interpretation of the social connotations attached to race highlights the inevitable intersection of racial and class passing in Levy's work. Guterl's study points to connections between different forms of passing through perceiving 'racial passing and class passing as closely and strangely related practices'.²⁵⁸ 'Racial passing', Guterl suggests, 'has always functioned, metaphorically, as class passing [...]' We need, in other words, to think hard about what it means to see class *and* race, together *and* apart'.²⁵⁹ Guterl's paper speaks to Vivien's experiences by addressing the means through which race and socio-economic opportunities are affiliated through a 'political economy of racism as defined by the imagined crispness of the white/black dyad'.²⁶⁰ He suggests that passing facilitates a form of social and economic mobility in an individual's capacity to traverse the white/black divide and socioeconomic disparities associated with it. His argument helps to map cultural, social and economic nuances on a racial spectrum to apprehend the economic and social privilege historically associated with whiteness. When applied to the representation of the sisters' differentiating experiences in London, Guterl's analysis assists in identifying the specific ways in which race and socio-cultural/economic opportunity intersect in everyday lives of black and mixed-race women.

Visibility and the Politics of 'Seeing' Race

Despite being sisters raised in the same household, Olive's and Vivien's encounters with London and the wider world are starkly different. The question of whether race is the defining differentia between them is an uneasy one and Levy's text poses challenging questions concerning individual and collective readings of identity-categories, namely to what extent is a subject's life trajectory informed by their race, gender or social positioning?

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p.168

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.173

There is a direct correlation between Olive's blackness and the more formative role that race plays in the shaping of her life; her trajectory as a visibly 'black' woman appears to be more fixed and lacking in opportunity. Olive is certainly deprived of many of the opportunities bestowed upon Vivien and consequently develops a more sceptical outlook on the world. The novel explicitly suggests that because 'Olive was darker. Black', she confronts more challenges in life: 'I'm sure that Mum and Vivien think I go on about colour too much. [...] But they don't know – they haven't lived my life, they haven't gone through what I've gone through'.²⁶¹ Olive's physical incapacity to navigate the racial spectrum in a similar way to Vivien renders her experiences of growing up as a working-class woman in London more challenging and abrasive.

Through the representation of Olive's experiences, Levy demonstrates the ways in which racism produces stereotyped representations that she wishes to parody. Unlike her academic and artistic sister who moves away from home to pursue her interests, Olive falls pregnant at a young age with a boyfriend who later abandons her and their baby and is compelled to move back home to live with her mother. Levy's portrayal of the social patterns attached to race are explicitly and, sometimes, uncomfortably played out in the sisters' starkly different lived experience. The choice of character names for the sisters serves to ironically emphasise the contrasting ways in which race shapes their lives. While Vivien's lighter skin leads to her being mistaken for originating from Mediterranean locations such as Italy or Spain, the cultural connotations attached to Olive's name and subsequent supposed appearance reinforce the fact that she 'was darker. Black'.²⁶²

Olive's mapping of north London contrasts with that of her sister. Despite being older, Olive feels left behind by Vivien: 'Me and Vivien went to the same school. But I always thought of it as Vivien's school, not mine, even though I went there long before she did'.²⁶³ Vivien is considered to be more academic and is encouraged to be

²⁶¹ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.8

²⁶² *Ibid*, p.1

²⁶³ *Ibid*, p.24

ambitious by both the school and Rose, the sisters' mother. Unlike Vivien, Olive is subject to racial profiling from a young age, forced to continually challenge and overturn preconceptions imposed upon her: 'I passed, even though I didn't want to go to that school. I just wanted to show them that I could, that I wasn't thick. My teacher at primary school said I'd never come to anything'.²⁶⁴ Olive's consciousness of being black is entrenched in her everyday experiences, as her commentary on school life makes clear: 'And no black girls. All white. So I knew that if I got in that straight away I'd be odd. I told Mum that there were no black girls, but she just smiled and said that it was good.'²⁶⁵ Rose's embarrassment and subsequent denial of Olive's race has repercussions – Olive cultivates a bitterness and resentment towards her mother and the system with which she is complicit.

In the early stages of the novel, at a local club, Olive meets Peter, a staunch socialist, who talks about 'how black people were exploited and how we should get together with the workers to overthrow all oppression'.²⁶⁶ Like Vivien, Olive maintains an anxiety around questions of origin, although on meeting Peter, she feels predisposed to discuss her parentage: 'And when he asked me where I came from, I didn't do what I usually did – stick my hands on my hips and shout, London England – I told him my parents were from Jamaica'.²⁶⁷ Olive's newfound pride over her racial and cultural identity stems from a confidence instilled by what Peter declares himself to be committed to. His activism and political outlook speak to Olive and she is seduced by the fact that he gives her permission to claim her heritage in a way that her sister and mother do not. Olive commences a relationship with Peter and soon afterwards finds herself being exploited by him for sex:

Once we started having sex, that's all he wanted to do. He stopped asking me if I liked it. Stopped kissing and cuddling with me on the settee before anyone came in. It was straight down to it. And sometimes in the afternoons I didn't want to, not really. I wanted to listen to him talk about what the world would be like when inequality was banished for ever. But it got to be a quick

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.25

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.24

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.38

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p.39

fuck then put the telly on. I didn't mind though – I loved him.

Then I missed my period.²⁶⁸

After giving birth to their child, Amy, Olive and Peter's relationship breaks down. Having met another woman, Peter collects his belongings from Olive's flat and drives away in her car: 'I watched him walk with his bags to the car – my car. [...] It was my car'.²⁶⁹ Olive is left to raise Amy on her own without financial support or the physical mobility afforded by a car. Olive's spirited and resolute character reveals itself in her determination to secure an independent and stable life for her and Amy. However, Levy denies Olive a happy outcome and again exposes the social complexities of race through the implications of a spirited and determined young woman attempting to prove herself.

'Prototypical' Representations of the Black Woman Subject

Levy presents Olive's trajectory in a way in which suggests that her racial identity continually subjugates her to maltreatment, implying that Olive's lack of mobility in the novel is compounded by gendered and racial prejudice. Applying intersectionality theory to an extract from the final pages of *Never far from Nowhere* provides a lens through which to understand the trauma brought about by institutionalised racism and sexism.

As explored in the introduction, Crenshaw's theory of 'intersectionality' addresses the synchronised patterns of sexism and racism. Intersectionality theory materialised as a popular scholarly tool for attending to postcolonial and African-American writing during the 1990s and was generally perceived as original in its acknowledgement of the coordinated patterns of racial and gendered prejudice. I would argue that it is in fact subsequent reactions and responses to Crenshaw's work that have proven most useful in reading the work by contemporary black British women writers. Nash's paper, 'Rethinking Intersectionality', recognises the

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p.50

²⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p.143

complexity of theorising identity categories as the paper sets out to 'construct a more complex view of theorizing identity and oppression'.²⁷⁰ While Nash acknowledges intersectionality's usefulness in providing a conceptual framework through which to consider the simultaneity of race and gender in the shaping of women's experience, her paper draws attentions to the instability of the category of 'woman', 'a contested and fractured terrain' that is inevitably conditioned by 'subjects with vastly different interests' and agendas.²⁷¹ Nash identifies unresolved tensions within the field of intersectionality, which in spite of the theory's scholarly prominence and popularity, remain un-interrogated by feminist or 'anti-racist' scholarship.

In response to the contradictions inherent to definitions of intersectionality, Nash identifies four crucial areas of contention: 'the lack of a clearly defined intersectional methodology, the use of black women as prototypical intersectional subjects, the ambiguity inherent to the definition of intersectionality, and the coherence between intersectionality and lived experiences of multiple identities'.²⁷² Of the four areas explored, the consideration of the theoretical significance of the black female subject is the one I find most productive for my reading of Olive's and Vivien's experiences in *Never Far From Nowhere*. What appears at first as a strategy to respond to the historical marginalisation of subjects whose experiences have been erased by hegemonic scholarship, upon closer examination, intersectionality's reliance on the black women subject as a stereotyped figure re-enshrines identity-based hierarchies that the theory originally set out to dismantle.

The tactical deployment of black women to support intersectionality theory's claims, renders the black woman subject the intersectional gold-standard through which theorists can 'ask the other question', to explore the spectres of racism and sexism'.²⁷³ It is intersectionality theory's inattention to the complex, nuanced social factors - what Nash defines as 'anticategorical complexity' - that cultivates an image

²⁷⁰ Nash, 'Rethinking Intersectionality', *Feminist Review*, 89 (2008), p.1

²⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.3

²⁷² *Ibid*

²⁷³ *Ibid*, p.8

of the black woman as a 'unitary and monolithic entity'.²⁷⁴ The distinguishing qualities between black women, including, for example, class, age, economic status and sexuality, are obscured by intersectionality theory's portrayal of the black woman subject as the homogenous 'other' in opposition to white women and black men. The contradictions inherent to intersectionality theory can be productively deployed in analysing Olive's embodiment as the 'prototypical' black woman subject and the consequential gendered racism she is subjected to.

Olive's vicious and traumatic encounter with the police in the below extract exemplifies the multiple distinguishing factors that affect the black woman's interaction with the world around her. This extract is taken from the penultimate chapter narrated by Olive in which she recalls one of her first experiences of driving after passing her test. A telling paradox underpins the harrowing chapter – the mobility brought about by Olive passing her driving test is undermined by the police's explicitly racist and sexist conduct. Unlike Rose or Vivien, Olive proactively sets out to learn how to drive and pass her test to generate opportunities for her and Amy. The grammar and tone of the opening line of the chapter is naïve, conveying the sheer pride Olive feels in succeeding in what she set out to do: 'I passed my driving test first time. The examiner thought I'd done very well'.²⁷⁵ The reader is reassured by the optimism attached to Olive's newfound passion: 'I made loads of plans'. The scene takes place on an evening when Olive puts her plans into action and borrows Eddie's van to collect belongings from Peter's flat. She first visits Eddie's father's flat to collect the van keys and then as she is driving to collect her belongings, she is stopped by the police for failing to switch on her headlights:

[...]

It was a Friday night, I found Eddie's parents' flat and rang the bell which played a tune. 'Hello, I've come to pick up Eddie's van,' I said to a man who stood there in a string vest and captain's hat. He stared at me and I watched his smile fade, the corner of his mouth slowly closing until he looked spiteful.

'Are you Eddie's dad?' I asked.

'I am.'

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 5 and p.8

²⁷⁵ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.245

'Eddie said I should pick up the keys to his van from you.'

He carried on staring at me.

'Well, how do I know who you are?' he said after a while.

[...]

So I said, 'But didn't he say I'd be coming – Vivien's sister?'

'Ooohh,' he said for about five minutes. 'You're Vivien's sister.' He frowned. 'You don't look like her. He never told me you was a – 'He stopped himself just in time, but I knew what he wanted to say. I put my hand out for the keys and left.

[...]

The man got out of the car. [...] He wasn't in uniform but I could tell he was a policeman by his shoes. [...] He came up to my window and I wound it down. I was just about to say something when he pulled the door of the car open. 'Would you get out of the car, please,' he said, and sort of looked in the air while I got out.

'What've I done?' I asked.

'Phew! Where shall I start, miss. Number one, no lights.'

I explained to him that I couldn't see any better with the headlights on so didn't bother. He laughed one of those sarcastic laughs that snorted out of his nose. He leant in the van window and clicked the headlights on then off again.

'You are joking, miss? I'll presume you're joking.'

[...]

'License,' he said again.

'I'm waiting for it to come,' I told him.

'Oh dear.'

'I've only just passed my test.'

'You shouldn't be driving if you don't know what you're doing.'

'I do,' I said. 'I've just passed my test.'

'There's no need to answer me back.'

'I wasn't, I was just saying - '

'Where are you going anyway?' His face looked hard and black with eyes as lifeless as a corpse.

'I'm going home.'

A uniformed policeman called him from the car. 'Here, Bas, is she a bloke?'

Bas looked at me and said, 'I dunno, shall I check?' He laughed.

'That van's registered to an Edward Frank Desmond Cooke,' the other one shouted over.

Bas looked at me with his dead eyes and said, 'Oh dear,' again.

I'd had enough. 'Look, I borrowed this van from my sister's boyfriend.'

And he said, 'Oh yeah, what d'you give him then – a ride for a ride, was it?'

I thought I'd heard wrong. 'What?' I said.

He smiled, then said: 'You got any drugs in the car?'

I stared at him. 'No,' I said.

'That's odd, you niggers usually have bit of ganja on ya.'

He said ganja so hard I felt his spit on my face. So I told him to fuck off.

He stood back and up to his full height. 'Right,' he said. He looked in the car. 'Get that fucking bag out of here and empty it, and keep your dirty black mouth shut.'

I went to get my bag and said 'Don't talk to me –'

'Just shut-up, slag,' he said, and grabbed at the bag before I could get it. [...] 'Come on, come on,' he tipped everything on to the bonnet of the van and started looking through my things – my purse, my make-up. He got my tampons and held one of them up in the air. 'What's this for?' He started thrusting it up in front of my face and grinning. [...] My comb dropped on the floor and he put his foot on it and then said, 'Pick it up then.' I bent down and when I stood up he was pushing the things back into my bag. I thought he'd finished.

'Can I go now?'

But he said, 'No, you can't. Not until you tell me what you're doing out. You looking for custom?'

I wanted to spit into his pasty fat face. 'I'm a married woman,' I shouted, 'I got a little girl.'

[...]

The other pig looked out of the window of the car and shouted 'Hurry up.' The other one said, 'Empty that bag.'

'I just did that.'

'Well I forgot what was in there. Empty it again, you lippy nigger bitch.'

I tipped the bag open and I noticed it straight away. I noticed it because it wasn't there before. A screwed-up piece of tin foil the size of a walnut. He grabbed it. He knew what he was looking for. 'Oh, what's this?' he said, peeling it open, all innocent.'

I said, 'It's not mine – it wasn't there before.' But he was busy sniffing it. 'Smells like marijuana to me.' He pushed the little parcel in my face. 'Don't it smell like ganja to you?'

'I don't know. I don't know what it smells like,' I said. [...] He called his friend over who started walking towards us, talking into a radio. I could hear him saying

they'd found suspected drugs on me, but he hadn't even seen it, not then.'

[...]

'Naughty, naughty,' he said. 'You'll have to spend a lot of time on your back getting out of this one, darling.'

[...] I started to cry. I told them that I'd never taken drugs, not ever in my life, that I was sorry about the lights and that I'd drive with them on in the future and to please, please, please let me go because I had to pick up my little girl. And they said, 'Shut your black gob and get in the car.'²⁷⁶

The beginning of the extract reflects a shift in tone from the sheer excitement Olive feels about passing her driving test to the realities of mobilising herself as a black woman. Written from Olive's perspective, Levy creates a cinematic quality, positioning the reader at Olive's standpoint to zoom in on Eddie's father's face. This technique emphasises Eddie's father's reaction to seeing Olive on his doorstep: 'I watched his smile fade, the corner of his mouth slowly closing until he looked spiteful'. This spitefulness is surprising, contrasting with the jovial and vivacious image that Levy paints of Eddie's father in earlier scenes with Vivien. The prolonged 'Ooohh' expressed when he realises that Olive is Vivien's sister makes for uneasy reading and subverts the seemingly innocent remark, 'You don't look like her'. The apprehensive atmosphere created by the ambiguous subject in Eddie's father's claim, 'He never told me you was a -' is intensified by the open hyphen, creating an exaggerated dramatic pause in the dialogue. The grammatical isolation of the lone determiner, 'a' is significant, foreshadowing the deployment of the same racist term by the policemen later in the passage.

The police's interaction with Olive acts as the culmination of racist tensions that underpin Olive's trajectory in the novel. The extract is timely in its contextualisation of the historically problematic relationship between the Metropolitan Police and London's black community at the end of the twentieth century. Although the date of the extract is ambiguous, judging by Olive's approximate age at this stage of the novel, it is likely to be set at the end of the 1980s. The Metropolitan Police's implementation of the 'SUS' campaign in the 1980s and 1990s saw disproportionate

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp.245-247

numbers of black drivers stopped and searched at a time when relations between them and the black community in London, most conspicuously, young-black men, was increasingly tense.²⁷⁷ The explicit discrimination that Olive is subject to derives from both gendered and racial prejudice and Levy exposes the entangled network of discrimination attached to intersecting gendered, sexual and racial subjectivities.

Levy creates a scene that is visually focused, heightening dramatic tension through cinematic qualities which bring it to life. The scene builds intensity in a way that makes the climax in which Olive's naivety is exploited seem inevitable. The policeman's obnoxiously confident 'sarcastic' laughing when initially questioning Olive provides an indication of how the encounter is likely to progress. Levy villainises the policeman's character from the outset, caricaturing his eagerness to assert authority purely for the thrill of doing so. His mocking use of the term 'miss' when ridiculing Olive's naïve mistake with regards to the lights and later repeated use of 'Oh dear' establishes his intention to belittle and patronise her. The dialogue further emphasises the power dynamic between the two characters; as the policeman becomes increasingly vocal and assertive, Olive learns to respond and shift ground to save herself, even if it compromises her principles.

The racial profiling that Olive experienced at primary school culminates here in the police's allusion to offensive and pernicious racial stereotypes, first accusing her of having drugs in the car and then explicitly making incriminating racist remarks: 'That's odd, you niggers usually have bit of ganja on ya'. Finally, the officers deploy institutionalised racist preconceptions by planting evidence: 'I tipped the bag open and I noticed it straight away. I noticed it because it wasn't there before'. From the moment that Olive is stopped by the police car, she is typified as a black woman. The officers' verbal attack is founded on negative gendered and racial stereotypes which are reinforced by the deployment of offensively racist and sexist terms to intimidate and provoke Olive, repeatedly insinuating that she is a prostitute: 'Oh yeah, what d'you give him then – a ride for a ride, was it?' After planting the drugs in Olive's handbag, the officer suggests that Olive will have to use sex as a bargaining tool to

²⁷⁷ See Paul Gilroy, 'The peculiarities of the black English' in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London, Serpent's Tail, 1993), pp.54-61

avoid being arrested: 'You'll have to spend a lot of time on your back getting out of this one'. Levy's use of language in the passage is reminiscent of a scene of sexual assault as the officers repeatedly penetrate Olive's personal space, spitting on her face and grabbing her bag. This invasion manifests itself in gendered terms when one officer attempts to humiliate Olive by maneuvering tampons fallen from her handbag in a phallic manner, 'thrusting it up in front of [her] face'. The gendered and overtly sexualized deployment of profane language such as 'dirty', 'slag' and 'bitch' equally invokes sexual aggression and violence and Olive's vulnerability and helplessness is aligned with a rape victim: 'I thought he'd finished'. In her moment of desperation, Olive summons an archetypal image of female virtue - the mother - to both defend and assert her position: 'please, please, please let me go because I have to pick up my little girl'.

After Olive is arrested for the charge of possession of cannabis, her solicitor advises her to plead guilty: 'I believe you about the police planting the drugs, Olive,' she said. 'But getting a magistrate to believe you is another matter. Just plead guilty: you'll only get a fine – twenty, thirty pounds – and then you can get on with your life'.²⁷⁸ Lima's analysis of this moment suggests that 'readers see the British Justice System in action: for the police, Olive is guilty of being Black'.²⁷⁹ The polarising black and white perspectives, represented by Vivien and Olive's alternating narratives in the novel, crescendo here in Olive's condemnation of the solicitor's advice as a reflection of British's society treatment of race:

She didn't understand, the little white woman in her white blouse, sitting in an office with a coffee machine bubbling and her university certificates on the wall. Her England is a nice place where people are polite to her, smile at her – ask her for directions in the street, sit next to her on the buses and trains and comment about the weather.²⁸⁰

The solicitor could be interpreted as a surrogate figure for Vivien here, providing Olive with an opportunity to express the understandable resentment she feels

²⁷⁸ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.272

²⁷⁹ Lima, p. 68

²⁸⁰ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.272

towards the opportunities that her sister has had. The affluence alluded to in the image of the solicitor's 'white blouse' and 'coffee machine' contrasts with the situation in which Olive finds herself, forced to confess to a crime that she did not commit. Olive's later shouting to Vivien that 'I didn't have a choice, I never had any choices, you had all the choices' pervades her description of the solicitor.²⁸¹ Olive's description of England conveys her understanding of a white experience of the place and the stereotyped image of the solicitor's England that Olive evokes, smiling at passers-by and talking about the weather, emphasises her isolation from it, seeing it as an illusion that is detached from her reality. Olive's encounter with the police, coupled with the solicitor's presumptuous approach to her case, instigates a decision to leave England and move to Jamaica, 'somewhere where being black doesn't make you different'.²⁸²

Levy's writing style here accentuates the shocking and explicit nature of the scene. As Lima notes, the extract presents 'racism plain and simple'.²⁸³ The author's account of the police's treatment of Olive is harrowing and serves to remind the reader of the institutional racism that plagues influentially powerful London bodies and organisations. At the same time, Levy's artistic intentions to expose the explicit racism that black women continue to be subject to indirectly presents Olive as a kind of 'touchstone' or monolithic object of racism. Nash's critique of intersectionality implies that black women are represented as sealed identities and is useful in assessing whether Levy's portrayal of Olive's experiences in fact cement the racialised hierarchies that this thesis is attempting to challenge. As a black single mother, the character of Olive could be interpreted as a racial stereotype. Olive is conscious of noting the solicitor's assessment of her according to a racial profile: 'She thought that I wouldn't care about having a police record. That it wouldn't make a difference to my life. My husband would still have left me with a child to bring up on my own. My mum will still roll her eyes and suck her teeth when I open my mouth to speak'.²⁸⁴ Olive's experiences both critique and parody the presumptions attached to racial identities. At the same time, Levy's portrayal of Olive is perhaps

²⁸¹ *Ibid*, p.278

²⁸² *Ibid*, p.272

²⁸³ Lima, p. 68

²⁸⁴ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.272

overly explicit or lacking in subtlety and could be criticised as being complicit in perpetuating and consolidating racial and gendered stereotypes. The representation of Olive's lived experience risks enshrining the black woman subject as the default intersectional figure. Nevertheless, Levy's approach, which reveals the alarming ways in which race impacts subjects' experiences is bravely overt and she achieves an exposure of the endurance of sexist and racist practice at the expense of subtlety with regards to her construction of Olive.

Productive Possibilities of Passing?

The structure and form of the novel, alternating between the differentiating perspectives of Vivien and Olive, reinforces Levy's risk in re-enshrining the racial opposition that she is exposing. The novel's structural form emphasises the distance between the sisters. The neatly alternating chapters, switching from one narrator to the other, breakdown a sense of sisterhood and emphasise the lack of synchronisation or symmetry in the accounts which Vivien and Olive separately recall. This form further accentuates Levy's mapping of female experience in London across a racial spectrum which rigidly upholds black and white binaries. In the final chapter of the novel, written from the perspective of Vivien, the opposition of black and white represented by Vivien and Olive, crescendos when the sisters reunite in their mother's flat. During her summer holidays from university, Vivien returns to Highbury and is surprised by feeling 'like a lost tourist'.²⁸⁵ Vivien's visit back to the council estate which she grew up on prompts her to question her notion of belonging: 'The flats looked like some opposing army had finally seized them, plundering them of any value and then leaving. I wondered if they had always looked so raw and desolate, or whether I was looking at them with different eyes'.²⁸⁶ Once inside the flat, looking around her childhood home and listening to her sister accuse her of not knowing 'what real life is like', Vivien acknowledges to herself that 'I had changed, I could feel it. I wanted so much from life now. I'd got big ideas'.²⁸⁷ A

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p.274

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p.277

succeeding tense altercation between the sisters corroborates the differences between them as Olive labels Vivien a 'Little snob' and Vivien criticises her sister of 'jealousy'.²⁸⁸

The confrontation incites Vivien to reflect upon the sisters' differing trajectories and query their next steps:

I looked at the photograph of Olive and me on the wall. Two little girls with identical yellow bows in our hair and happy, smiling chubby cheeks. But now Olive's arms were folded on the world. She was angry with everything, with everyone. And I had grown too big for our council flat, but not sure where else I would fit. Where did we belong?²⁸⁹

The vivid image of the 'identical yellow bows' worn by each sister in the photograph symbolises a similarity and connection between the sisters that is superficial and unable to be mirrored in real life. Vivien's reading of her own situation suggests that she has fully passed into the traditionally middle-class white world of which she had previously aspired to be a part. Her expression of un-belonging in the environment in which she grew up recalls Nix and Qian's study on passing, which implies that the most 'successful' cases of passing occur when a subject becomes fully integrated into the identity-category which they have infiltrated and is unable to pass back to live as their other self.²⁹⁰ The distinction between the image of Olive's 'folded' arms, a sign of both protest against and protection from the world's treatment of her, and Vivien's metaphorically open arms, embracing the opportunities on offer to her, captures the sisters' contrasting outlooks. While Olive remains determined to escape London altogether and set up a new life in Jamaica 'where she knows that she will be accepted [...] because she's black', Vivien's oscillation between two worlds has left her with a wealth of options, but a displaced sense of belonging²⁹¹: "Tell her Vivien . . . go on, tell your sister. Vivien, tell her, tell her where you belong.' [...] answered my mum the only way I could. I said, 'I don't know'".²⁹²

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p.278

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.281

²⁹⁰ See Nix and Qian, p.15

²⁹¹ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.280

²⁹² *Ibid*, p.281

The final line of the novel, open to many interpretations, does not offer the reader an answer to Vivien's complex questions regarding her belonging. In an ironic replaying of Olive's anxieties around being ostracised from an England where fellow passengers on public transport smile and talk to each other, a 'white-haired old woman' strikes up a conversation with Vivien on the train back to university. When she asks, "Where do you come from, dear?", Vivien responds by stating:

I looked at my reflection in the train window – I've come a long way, I thought. Then I wondered what country she would want me to come from as I looked in her eyes. 'My family are from Jamaica,' I told her. 'But I am English'.²⁹³

On first reading, these final lines of the novel appear to establish a neat conclusion, suggesting Vivien's reconciliation with her roots and an awakening to her diasporic self as both Jamaican and English. Lima notes that 'there are some readers who will be optimistic about this ending and argue that Levy has managed to reconceptualise Englishness as she claims it for one of her protagonists'.²⁹⁴ I would contend that Levy's own motivations for writing this ending are less clear-cut.

My reading of Vivien's final statement is more sceptical and refers back to the social mobility attached to acts of passing. As Lima makes clear, Vivien's wondering which country the old lady would 'want me to come from', reinforces the 'whiteness implied in the identity 'English''.²⁹⁵ The paradox underpinning Vivien's subsequent articulation of her cultural heritage derives from having conducted herself in a way that denied her racial and social background. There is a confidence in Vivien's refusal to offer the fictionalised exotic distant home, for example, Mauritius, that her interlocutor assumes here; a confidence which is a product of Vivien's living away from home at art college and passing across the lines of race and class to construct a life, which in her sister's words forces her to lose touch with her roots: 'I feel sorry

²⁹³ *Ibid*, p.282

²⁹⁴ Lima, p.70

²⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p.70

for you because you don't know who you are any more'.²⁹⁶ Performances of passing in the two extracts demonstrate possibilities for Vivien to mobilise herself to the extent that she envisions a future as 'a would be artist who was getting used to looking for beauty in everything', instilling her with a confidence and energy for life which Olive is denied.²⁹⁷ Unlike her sister, who consistently has to claim her blackness to counter her mother's discrimination towards the colour of her skin ('No, Mum, I'm Black'), Vivien's younger self is reassured by the fact that her friends do not see her as black: 'Viv, you're not really a darkie [...] You're one of us'.²⁹⁸ The declaration of her true self as British with Jamaican roots, at the end of *Never Far from Nowhere* contradicts her efforts to disguise her Jamaican heritage throughout the rest of the novel. The confidence and assurance with which Vivien's declares an identity she was previously embarrassed by indicates the productive possibilities of passing. Passing enables Vivien, through an educational and enriching journey to maturity, to claim her cultural heritage in a way in which she was previously wary of and not confident in doing so.

Through a comparative analysis of Vivien and Olive's experiences in London, this section of the chapter has sought to expose the ways in which race is read and recognised in Levy's 1970s and 1980s north London setting. As the above makes clear, Levy's novel resists providing its reader with a definite answer to queries concerning passing. The overly binarised representation of the 'choices' the two sisters have in performing an idea of their respective selfhoods manifest themselves through Vivien's passing. I agree with Lima's assertion that this ending is purposefully problematic and depicts Levy encouraging her readers to 'realise the injustice of society and work together to change it'.²⁹⁹ While Olive's life remains grounded in her north London council flat, Vivien's passing undeniably renders her physically and socially more mobile, allowing her to extend her microcosmic north London world to new realms. If Vivien's narrative conveys the social and cultural opportunities made available through racial and social passing, Olive's narrative reveals the seismic effects which race can have on a subject's experience of the city

²⁹⁶ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.276

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p.274

²⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p.7 and p.88

²⁹⁹ Lima, p.71

and its residents. Yet, Levy's representation of passing is far from positive in its confusion of Vivien's sense of self and denial of her social and racial background.

In the next section of this chapter, I develop this exploration of the implications of passing to think about the deceit and denial inherent to performances of passing. Extending this section's discussion of the relationship between identity categories and lived experiences, the next part of this chapter engages with Evaristo's representation of her protagonist, Barrington Walker, to explore how complexly interwoven race, sex and class are in acts of passing. More specifically, Vivien's social passing is appropriated in a new London context to consider the simultaneously liberating and limiting aspects of passing.

Her encounters with the city and the people in it encompasses the precarious ways in which racial identities are read and recognised.

Passing:
Racial, Cultural and Sexual Transformation in Bernardine Evaristo's *Mr Loverman*

*We seventy-five years ole next year, Morris.
 Can you believe it? Wha d'ya say we spend
 the fourth quarter of our cycle
 together – discreetly.³⁰⁰*

Sexual Passing

Representations of passing in a British context are not unique to Levy's work. As the subsequent part of this chapter will illuminate, passing also manifests itself in different forms in the work by Bernardine Evaristo. I find it fascinating that the subject of passing has not been more widely contextualised within British literature to explore not only representations of crossing racial and social lines, but sexual lines too. Until the legalisation of homosexual acts under the Sexual Offences Act 1967, sexual activity that took place between persons of the same sex was criminalised. The social and cultural order of British history traditionally upheld the family unit and the reproductive functions of heterosexual marriage. The implications of denying legitimacy to homosexuality directed subjects who were sexually inclined to members of the same sex to 'pass' as heterosexual and remain 'in the closet' for their whole lives.³⁰¹ Through an analysis of Evaristo's representation of sexual passing in her 2013 novel, *Mr Loverman*, I wish to appropriate ideas around sexual passing to contemporary London to demonstrate the continuation and permanency of cases of passing in twenty-first century society. More specifically, I engage with the representation of *Mr Loverman's* protagonist, Barrington Walker, to explore the motivations underpinning sexual passing. I investigate the ways in which Barrington challenges stereotyped images of Caribbean men by turning the heterosexuality attached to hyper-masculine culture in this context inside out.

³⁰⁰ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.43

³⁰¹ See Jenny Sharpe and Samantha Pinto, (Review) 'The Sweetest Taboo: Studies of Caribbean Sexualities', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 32:1 (2006) [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.1086/505541.pdf>] pp.247-274

Jeffrey McCune, an African-American queer theorist offers a useful definition to reinforce what I mean by the term 'sexual passing'. He refers to sexual passing as 'performing discretion to move into respectable categories of sexual identity'.³⁰² To support my reading of Barrington's passing, I engage with strands of thought from both African-American queer theory and discourses relating to Caribbean writing's depictions of masculinity to investigate the cultural, racial and gendered nuances which shape Barrington's decision to commit to a lifetime of passing, denying his true sexual self. Evaristo's feminist agenda is tangible as she extends her area of representation to propose that men have as an important a role to perform as women in challenging patriarchy. In the pages that follow, I argue that her representation of Barrington's navigation of sexual and gendered lines interrogates and exposes the hypocrisy of ideals of masculinity.

Mr Loverman endeavours to breakdown both racial and gendered stereotypes on a number of levels. As a black British woman writer, the novel chronicles Evaristo's moving away from the discursive and thematic expectations imposed upon black British women writers to re-inflect a 'search for belonging' to a sexual realm. In her characterisation of Barrington, she derails homogenised images of the Caribbean father to expose the psychological and emotional complexities of closeted sexuality. In an interview in 2015, Evaristo revealed the novel's commitment to overturning trends within the black British literary canon:

Yes. I wanted him to disrupt the stereotypes. So he's self-educated. He's an articulate man, to the point that he makes up his own language. He's also well off: he is a landlord. He is not impoverished. He is not a victim. And that's what some people expect. He has grown roots deep enough in Britain not to want to leave it. This novel is not about nonbelonging in terms of the problems of migration, cultural difference, and racial antipathy. Barrington is at home in Stoke Newington.³⁰³

³⁰² Jeffrey Q. McCune, 'Introduction: Discrete/Discreet Acts, Goin' Down Low' in *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2014), p.5

³⁰³ Jennifer Gustar, 'Putting History in its Place: An Interview with Bernardine Evaristo', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 9:3 (2015) [<https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpv003>], p.442

Evaristo's representation of Barrington's sense of 'home' reflects a contemporary depiction of London which traces and simultaneously modernises the trajectory of Sam Selvon and E.R. Braithwaite's hyper-masculine narratives. The novel re-appropriates post-war Windrush texts to the twenty-first century, re-rooting the concerns and anxieties of contemporary black Britons 'to disrupt people's expectations of that generation, because many writers have told that Windrush story now'.³⁰⁴

Barrington is a seventy-four year old Antiguan-born and raised Hackney resident. A self-confessed immaculate dresser, Barrington exudes confidence and flamboyance: 'still spruced-up and sharp suited with a rather manly swagger'.³⁰⁵ As husband to Carmel, father to Donna and Maxine and grandfather to Daniel, Barrington appears to uphold the image of a traditional devoted family man. His romantic and sexual life however is peppered with an ambivalence that is both deceptive and liberating. Barrington cultivates chameleonic qualities to enable him to maintain two lives concurrently – one with Carmel and one with his life-long best friend and secret lover, Morris de la Roux. Barrington and Morris' relationship commenced in school back in Antigua: 'I been entertaining him ever since I sat behind his goody-two-shoes self in Mr Torrington's algebra class when he was eleven'.³⁰⁶ Barrington negotiates his sexuality by passing as heterosexual, remaining married to Carmel, and concealing his true self from any of his family members, while simultaneously actively pursuing a romantic and sexual relationship with Morris. Evaristo's presentation of passing exposes the deceptive and manipulative traits that acts of passing can sometimes demand. While Carmel remains oblivious to Barrington's 'real' relationship with Morris, she is aware of his unfaithfulness and repeatedly presumes that he is with another woman: 'he started forgetting that [...] *decent* men actually *do* come home every night; otherwise their wives get upset and end up crying themselves to sleep'.³⁰⁷ It is later noted that if Carmel were to be exposed to

³⁰⁴ Gustar, p.437

³⁰⁵ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.6

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p.81

³⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p.144

the truth about Barrington's sexuality, 'it would kill her.'³⁰⁸ Morris' romantic life with Barrington is equally un-fulfilling, stunted by its incapacity to exist openly in the 'real' world. At different stages within the novel, Barrington repeatedly assures Morris that he intends to end his marriage with Carmel: 'Soon as she back you got to do the doings [...] Don't mess me around, Barry, or you might lose me.'³⁰⁹ The text's portrayal of Barrington's double-life demonstrates the emotional and psychological complexities attached to passing. Evaristo's presentation of Barrington's passing across sexually-orientated lines reveals the damaging emotional repercussions that a subject's passing can have upon both themselves and the people around them.

The novel is predominately presented from the perspective of Barrington, who narrates twelve of the eighteen chapters. Readers are reacquainted with Carmel's narration on six occasions, at ten-year intervals, tracing her trajectory as a young newly-married woman, through pregnancy, post-natal depression, an extra-marital affair and finally a revival of her investment in faith and religion. Evaristo marks the differences in Carmel's and Barrington's styles of narration from the moment that the reader opens the novel. The chapter titles presented on the contents page emphasise the husband and wife's contrasting outlooks. While the titles of the chapters which Barrington narrate all begin with 'The Art of', for example, 'The Art of Being Normal' and 'The Art of Metamorphosis', the chapters which Carmel narrate are defined as songs, for example, 'The Song of Sweetness' and 'Song of Despair'.³¹⁰ Barrington's musings on the 'The Art of' different subjects imply a pursuit of and, in Barrington's case, a bragging about, a level of knowledge on a particular topic. To master an art requires an approach that is well-informed, calculated and measured. By comparison, the melody and rhythm of song reflects a more instinctive expression of emotion. The form of Carmel's songs encapsulates the intense and uncontrollable emotions that she feels at formative moments in her life which are captured by the novel. In comparison to Barrington's eloquent turn of phrase and erudite cultural references, Carmel's narration appears more rambling and

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p.221

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p.80

³¹⁰ See *Contents*, Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*

disorderly. While Barrington deploys phrases such as 'Plato said being a moral person meant not just knowing what is right but choosing it as well', by contrast, the beginning of Carmel's sentences are un-capitalised and commonly expressed in long unpunctuated phrases alluding to panic and breathlessness: 'it's not that you don't love your husband / it's just that at the age of thirty-six you been waiting twenty years for him to love you'.³¹¹ Yet, there is a beauty in its disjointedness and Evaristo succeeds in realistically portraying the challenges of marriage, motherhood and patriarchal systems compellingly through Carmel's narrative voice.

Along with Evaristo's choice of chapter titles, the structure of the novel replays and emphasises the gendered dynamic of Barrington's and Carmel's relationship. Barrington emerges as an eloquent orator and utilises his charm and humour to disperse the emotional harm that his actions cause those around him. The contrasting styles of each narrator are quickly established, with Barrington's dominant narrative presence appearing overtly confident in comparison to Carmel's self-critical and anxious intermittent interjections. In the chapter entitled 'Song of Prayer', the reader learns that Carmel is aware of the fact that her husband conducts adulterous affairs, but is oblivious to Barrington's true sexual inclinations:

...on your own again is it, Carmel?
late this night, praying up against your bed, waiting for
him to come home, knowing he might not come home at
all, but you can't help yourself, can you, acting like a
right mug, as the English people say
waiting, waiting, always waiting...³¹²

Carmel's internal monologue evokes a sense of loneliness, the opening rhetorical question highlighting her solitude. The portrayal of the act of prayer serves to convey Carmel's hopelessness, referring to faith in religion to try to remedy her situation. Carmel's 'Song of Prayer' appears more devout and virtuous in the knowledge that it is taking place at the same time as Barrington is engaging in sexual activity with another person. Her 'gold-standard' morality in comparison to her husband's guileful tendencies is further accentuated by her awareness of the

³¹¹ *Ibid*, p.9 and p.154

³¹² *Ibid*, p.142

realities of his absence: 'you can't help yourself, can you, acting like a right mug, as the English people say'. The futility of Carmel's waiting is emphasised by the grammar of the final line of this quotation, the commas stipulating a pause between the repeated use of 'waiting', prolonging the phrase and signifying the extent of Carmel's waiting.

Evaristo's presentation of the loneliness that Carmel is subject to as a result of Barrington's affairs justifies her decision to seek sexual and romantic fulfillment elsewhere. Carmel eventually becomes frustrated by waiting and resolves to 'deviate from the path of righteousness'.³¹³ In the chapter entitled 'Song of Desire', she becomes more aware of 'the plenty of attractive middle-aged fellas (even the English ones)' who work alongside her at Hackney Council.³¹⁴ Carmel meets Reuben at work and after a series of flirtatious encounters, he initiates a sexual affair which enflames a sensual passion in Carmel that she had previously not known: 'you was *carnivorous*, you was *omnivorous* [...] and *there, Reuben, here...Reuben, here, Reuben, here and there* / against the filing cabinet [...] there, on you front, on your back, on your side / an you / was / *a n i m a l*'.³¹⁵ Carmel's sexual appetite symbolised by the animalistic vocabulary such as '*carnivorous*' is awakened by a physical interaction that is founded upon mutual lust and desire. With Reuben, Carmel discovers a new empowered sexual self, 'someone [she'd] never been' in her marital life with Barrington.³¹⁶ Carmel's affair is simultaneously galvanizing and gloomy; while she is finally able to arouse a more expressive sexuality later in life through her relationship with Reuben, the intense joy and gratification expressed in the scene suggests that this encounter unearths a sexual pleasure that she has previously not experienced. Until this point, Carmel's attitude towards her own gratification reflects a gendered, generational understanding of sexuality that focuses more on the biological 'needs' of men. Despite being unhappy with Barrington, Carmel upholds the sanctity of marriage, her religious and cultural beliefs previously deterring her from indulging the idea of seeking sexual satisfaction outside the realm of marriage. While Barrington's passing enables him to attain sexual

³¹³ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.154

³¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.199

³¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.207

³¹⁶ *Ibid*

fulfilment and pleasure from his relationship with Morris, it prohibits Carmel from unearthing a mutually loving and lustful sexual relationship within her marriage.

African-American Queer Theory and the 'DL' Figure

Investigating Barrington's motivation to pass is elucidated by McCune's study on 'DL' practices in African-American contexts. In his introduction to, *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing*, McCune initiates a dialogue relating to the sexual practices of bisexual or gay black men who have sexual relationships with other men while maintaining relationships with women. McCune defines this community as 'DL' men and argues that they 'indeed, are passing subjects':³¹⁷

These men who often disidentify with traditional descriptors of sexuality (gay, bisexual, etc.) have been referred to and refer to themselves as "men on the down low" (DL). Often DL men practice discreet sexual acts while privileging spaces that are more heteronormative and that often protect or conceal their male-male sexual desires/practices.³¹⁸

McCune contextualises the discretion associated with the notion of the 'DL' figure through a twelve-part music video entitled 'Trapped in a Closet' by the 'controversial and creative' R&B artist, R. Kelly.³¹⁹ The video was originally aired in a similar format to a soap-serial, each episode of 'high drama' climaxing in suspense to build audience anticipation for the next chapter. The dynamic between husband and wife in the video is pertinent to Carmel and Barrington's relationship and assists in analysing Barrington's compulsion to pass.

R. Kelly's video interprets the notion of being 'trapped in a closet' both literally and metaphorically.³²⁰ In the opening of Chapter One, Cathy and her lover, Sylvester, are in her bedroom having spent the night together. When Cathy hears footsteps, she

³¹⁷ McCune, p.19

³¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.4

³¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.1

³²⁰ *Ibid*, p.3

encourages Sylvester to hide in her bedroom closet to avoid being discovered by her husband, Rufus, who has arrived home unexpectedly. While wife and husband are engaged in kissing on the bed, Rufus becomes suspicious when he hears a mobile-phone ring and searches the bedroom and bathroom for the culprit, subsequently opening the closet door to be confronted by Sylvester with a raised pistol in his hand. In an attempt to placate the threat of the gun, Rufus reveals, and states on the basis of 'we're all coming out of the closet today' that he has a mystery lover. To the surprise of both Cathy and Sylvester, Rufus' mystery lover reveals himself and Cathy discovers that her husband has been having a secret affair with another man.³²¹ Here, Kelly subverts the clichéd image of the lover hiding in a closet to subvert and challenge sexual and gendered identities in the context of African-American domestic spaces. Kelly's representation of Sylvester's physical entrapment in a closet and Rufus' sexual entrapment in a closet challenges the idea of discreet spaces to consider the ways in which sexuality and sexual identities are read and recognised. The titillating dynamic between the public and private dyad that sexual identities engender is further complicated by subjects who disguise their natural sexual inclinations to pass as heterosexual. Evaristo's artistic motivation to present a character such as Barrington resonates with Kelly's music video and perhaps reflects a deliberately and self-conscious reference to the video. Like Rufus, Barrington's place in the world as a gay black man passing as straight is liminal: 'caught between two worlds – idealized black masculinity and queer desire'.³²² Appropriated within strikingly different artistic and creative contexts, Kelly's and Evaristo's respective representations of Rufus and Barrington allow me to reconsider the relationship between sexual orientation and the racial, cultural and social identities affixed to it.

The reaction to R. Kelly's video signalled distaste within the African-American community surrounding same-sex relations. McCune notes that on the day of the finale's release, he 'counted approximately twenty radio conversations [...] that posed the question, "Sister, what would you do if your man was sleeping with

³²¹ R. Kelly, 'Trapped in a Closet: Chapter 1, Chapter 2 and Chapter 3' [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30p9ly7yZts>]

³²² McCune, p.19

another man?"³²³ McCune calls upon the video as an example of the mass media attention and momentum that the topic of 'DL' practices evoke. The controversy surrounding the topic of black gay lives derives from the threat that sexual passing practices pose to established models of black masculinity and sexuality, demonstrating hegemonic anxieties around the porosity of identity-categories. McCune's arguments resonate with the atmosphere of distrust, paranoia and uncertainty generated from the blurring of racial lines which racial passing has historically produced: 'the core of popular fascination with this phenomenon: a crisis over sexual certainty'.³²⁴ Similarly to African-American criticism's reading of racial passing, McCune's analysis of the 'DL' figure emphasises the liminal qualities of sexual passing. McCune observes that:

DL men and women exemplify a "complex personhood" – where they negotiate between the acceptable and unacceptable, the respectable and disrespectable, the queer and non-queer. This navigation, a DL way of being in the world, is an articulation of a politics of discretion – which is not exclusive to sexual acts or outsiders, but rather available to all who seek agency under the constraints of surveillance.³²⁵

McCune's assessment of the liminal qualities of DL lives resonates with the ways in which Barrington negotiates his double-life, balancing his roles as husband to Carmel and father to Donna and Maxine on the one hand and secret lover to Morris.

Barrington recurrently passes from one world to the other, reluctantly spending time apart from Morris to uphold his commitment to his wife and daughters: 'My heart sinks because I going into the lion's den. / This is the story of our lives. / Hellos and goodbyes'.³²⁶ Despite resenting his tie to Carmel and the heterosexual life attached to it, a sense of pride and patriarchal responsibility prevents Barrington from leaving the family home. The fixedness of his commitment to Carmel is emphasised by his physical inability to remove his wedding ring when he claims that

³²³ *Ibid*, p.4

³²⁴ *Ibid*, p.5

³²⁵ *Ibid*, p.8

³²⁶ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.5

'only a pair of metal cutters could get it off my fingers'.³²⁷ The socially mobile opportunities made available through passing again manifest themselves in a comparative exploration of Barrington's two worlds. Passing as a heterosexual family man, Barrington pursues a successful career in the automobile industry and invests in properties in north east London: 'I'd not even needed to work at Ford's for years, because I'd been building up my property business since the sixties, buying cheap, doing up, getting Soloman & Rogers Estate Agency to rent out'.³²⁸ Barrington's career in a traditionally male-orientated, macho industry reinforces the hyper-masculinity of his passing self and bolsters the heteronormative family-man image that he wishes to portray to the outside world. Countering this persona is Barrington's self who spends his disposable income on luxurious items such as 'handmade English brogues from Foster & Son on Jermyn Street' and walks down Bond Street with Morris delighted by the prospect of drawing 'curious, even, dare I say I, admiring glances'.³²⁹ The economic and social stability attached to Barrington's passing life as husband and father renders his preferred sexual life more fragile, precarious and risky.

Queering the Caribbean: Assessing the Relationship between Hyper-masculinity and Heteronormativity

The notion of 'Queering the Caribbean' is a relatively new and burgeoning area of literary criticism that remains on the margins of both postcolonial and queer theory. The study of sexuality in the Caribbean has historically been approached with caution by scholars fearful of re-enshrining the stereotypes of hyper-sexuality and promiscuousness that slavery and colonialism imprinted.³³⁰ In more recent years, a number of scholars, including Thomas Glave and Kamala Kempadoo, have made invaluable contributions to discourses surrounding the relationship between sexuality and gender and, more specifically, hyper-masculinity, in Caribbean culture.

³²⁷ *Ibid*, p.12

³²⁸ *Ibid*, p.9

³²⁹ *Ibid*, p.84

³³⁰ See Kamala Kempadoo, 'Introduction: Thinking About the Caribbean' in *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race and Sexual Labor* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp.1-14

Within a contemporary Caribbean context, 'homoeroticism and same-gender sexual relations are denied legitimacy'.³³¹ The implications of operating outside of the parameters of 'normative' sexual behaviour within the Caribbean have traditionally been severe and particular types of sexual activity remain criminalised today. In our consideration of Evaristo's representation of Barrington, Glave's and Kempadoo's respective studies prove crucial in assessing the negotiation of social and cultural gendered expectations and sexuality.

Our Caribbean, a collection of essays edited and with an introduction from Glave, sets out to grant voice to gay and lesbian authors from the Caribbean who have previously been 'immobilized and cowed by silence'.³³² Glave's powerful and productive publication eloquently articulates the stigmatisation of same-sex relations in the Caribbean: 'That erotic-emotional desire for people of our own gender that it seemed no one – not anyone at all – ever spoke about, much less wished to hear about unless in the realm of "scandal" and "disgrace"'.³³³ Glave's candid and personal commentary touches upon the loneliness felt by 'those people', 'men-loving men' and 'women-loving women', who have been forced to suppress their desires and emotion to avoid the inherent guilt and shame attached to sexual inclinations to members of the same-sex in the Caribbean: 'Were there others in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean who also pondered "unspeakable" things and thought in the depths of their own silences "unmentionable" thoughts?'³³⁴ His introduction articulates the inherent guilt attached to sexual inclinations to members of the same-sex within a Caribbean context.

The narrative form of Evaristo's novel, consisting of diary entries written from the perspectives of Barrington and Carmel projects the internal dialogues of both characters in a fashion that resonates with Vivien's inner voice in *Never Far from Nowhere*. The first-person diary narratives enable the reader to access the inner workings of the narrators' minds, providing a level of intimacy that complements the novel's exploration of innermost human anxieties around sexuality, identity and

³³¹ *Ibid*, p.9

³³² Glave, p.2

³³³ *Ibid*, p.3

³³⁴ *Ibid*, p.2

gender: 'I am not given to jitteriness, but it's jitteriness I feeling, and *vulnerable*, like one of those annoying *emotionalists*'.³³⁵ Glave's text permits the reader an equally exposing insight into the workings of his romantic and sexual self, similarly using italics to indicate a shift from public discourse to an internal dialogue:

*it doesn't seem as though I can possibly be myself, my fullest truest self, the self that everyone would love to know and hug and laugh with, greet with open hands and arms, if I remain here...remain here.*³³⁶

The duality of Glave's private and public self powerfully connects with Barrington's quandary. His musings reflect the guilt and shame attached to sexual inclinations to members of the same-sex in Caribbean culture and points to the difficulty of articulating and expressing that desire through appropriate words and forms. At the same time, Glave exposes the forced isolation imposed upon persons who are compelled to remain in a dark, lonely realm in the incapacity to engage with society as his/her true self.

In the final passage of the first chapter, Barrington's surprisingly blunt internal imaginary confession of his true sexuality to Carmel symbolises the tension between his internal self and the image that he projects to the outside world:

Carmel...Carmel, *dear*, you know what? I tell you what? [...] God a-damn me the day I chose to enter this hellish so-called marriage instead of following my Morris-loving, full-blooded, hot-blooded, pumping-rumping, throbbing organ of an uncontainable, unrestrainable, undetainable man-loving *heart*.³³⁷

This passage reflects an explicit expression of Barrington's sexuality. The carnal imagery that he uses to describe his passion for Morris ignites a lustful sexuality that contrasts with the sense of shame and embarrassment that he attaches to his same-gender sexual orientation in the rest of the novel. In the absence of an

³³⁵ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p.42

³³⁶ Glave, p.2

³³⁷ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p. 17

audience, Barrington is able to proudly claim his sexual self and perform his true sexual identity.

Glave's rationalisation of the stigma attached to homosexuality in the Caribbean supports a reading of Barrington's approach to his true sexual identity. The dichotomies that underpin Barrington's life extend to his attitudes on gender and sexuality. The novel deploys humour to navigate delicate and intimate issues around identity and societal labelling of the sexual body. Evaristo's representation of Barrington's hypocrisy in his attitudes towards gender roles and affiliated sexualities is handled with a witty and ironic tone, but equally demonstrates the ways in which a person's outlook on the world is a product of the time and culture in which they are born. As Barrington's youngest daughter Maxine declares, 'You're one of the post-Victorian, pre-feminist Antiguan generation that didn't form strong platonic relationships across the sexes'.³³⁸ Maxine's comments assist in conceptualising the divide between the sexes that Barrington fashions in his mind. Evaristo exploits the ambiguities and tensions embodied in Barrington: he is himself at odds with his own desire in the sense that his own world view cannot imagine a non-hetero status quo.

The reader is first introduced to Barrington's antiquated views on gender in the early pages of the novel when he describes Morris as 'a sensitive fella but not hypersensitive, because that would really make him more woman than man – especially at a certain time of the month when they get that crazed look in they eyes and you better not say the wrong thing or the right thing in the wrong way'.³³⁹ Aside from characterising Morris' faults using explicitly misogynist 'feminine' stereotypes, Barrington's reading of Morris at this early stage of the novel provides the reader with an indication as to his problematic attitudes towards gender and his own sexuality. Morris' calm and retiring demeanour is accentuated by Barrington's gregariousness. Morris' more relaxed approach to life is arguably exploited by Barrington, who encourages him to play a more submissive role, adopting the traditional archetype of a woman in a heterosexual relationship. Barrington repeatedly appears to project his hidden sexual self on to Morris, who is presented

³³⁸ *Ibid*, p.93

³³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 3

as more sensitive and less inclined to share chauvinistic or misogynistic opinions. His comments introduce the reader to the dynamic that shapes their relationship, in which he endeavours to retain the sense of hyper-masculinity traditionally associated with Caribbean men of his generation, whereas Morris' behavioural traits are less extroverted and in turn, he adopts a role in the relationship that may be considered more traditionally effeminate. Barrington clearly practices queer sex, but glosses it in the language of heterosexuality to allow him to uphold the status quo.

In addition to his unfaithfulness to Carmel, Barrington, seemingly unknowingly to Morris, conducts sexual relationships with other men too. Barrington's first-person narrative reveals an overt sexuality, with anecdotes of dalliances with different men conveying an enduring sexual curiosity and interest:

Come to think of it wonder what happened to that fella Stephen Swindon or Swinthorne or whatever it was. Not thought about him in years. I was forty-eight, he was about ten years younger, and from the way he used to ogle me in class, totally up for taste of Antiguan masculinity. We fellas don't need to spell nothing out. We got vibe language. Don't need to spend money courting and being polite and telling a girl how pretty she is for weeks, either, before we allowed to get our cocks out either.³⁴⁰

Barrington's recalling of his encounter with Stephen demonstrates the ways in which he exudes a sexuality that is tangible to those around him. The 'vibe language', an imaginary dialogue that occurs between Barrington and Stephen, enables the pair to communicate a physical mutual attraction to one another without any verbal dialogue. Barrington's approach to meeting sexual partners is reminiscent of a peacock, depending on his physical appearance and style to entice potential lovers. As the passage demonstrates, his groomed and stylish outward appearance has a magnetic force, drawing the attention of often younger men. At the same time, Barrington's interpretation of Stephen's 'ogling' simultaneously conveys a self-assurance that is inherent to his character, presumptuously taking pride in others' reaction to his physicality. The emphasis on his 'Antiguan masculinity' as a physical

³⁴⁰*Ibid*, p.157

lure reflects his alignment of sexual attraction with a hyper-masculinity associated with Caribbean men. The passage denotes a reassertion of aggressive masculinity outside a heteronormative context. The bluntness of Barrington's deployment of the phrase 'get our cocks out' reasserts a patent masculinity inherited from a gendered and cultural system which privileges the sexual needs of men. Barrington's uninhibited assuming of the phallic power of his sexual organs reflects a sexuality that is dominant and confident. The re-presentation of this form of overt masculinity in an environment in which Barrington is attempting to attract the attention of another man carries a certain irony. The paradox underpinning Barrington's confident sexuality in this context is the embarrassment and discomfort he feels in accepting his homosexual inclinations and actions. The masculinity articulated here, which repeats and endorses a patriarchal hyper-masculinity tied to notions of heterosexuality, is inadvertently challenging the sexual and gendered 'norms' that is expected to hold in place. As the passage conveys, Barrington's sexuality is both conflicted and complex in relation to his generational and cultural attitudes towards gender and sexuality.

Kempadoo's analysis assists in understanding the traditional Caribbean attitudes towards sexuality and gender maintained by Barrington. She argues that 'relations of power' in the Caribbean revolve around 'heterosexism and patriarchy':³⁴¹

While both heterosexism and patriarchy seem to nestle around masculine dominance, the combination, i.e. heteropatriarchy, signals a distinction and relatedness between the ways in which sexuality and gender are socially, legally and politically organized. It is the combination that marginalizes and criminalizes gendered subjects who transgress established sexual boundaries.³⁴²

As the above makes clear, Caribbean culture has traditionally upheld heterosexual masculinity to establish a sexual hierarchy in which masculine desire and procreative intentions are privileged. In turn, non-heteronormative sexual behaviour, including same-sex relations, are stigmatised and denounced. Within this

³⁴¹ Kempadoo, 'Introduction', p. 9

³⁴² *Ibid*, p.9

context, fixed gendered roles are inextricably attached to sexual identities. As Kempadoo states, 'heterosexuality defines gender'.³⁴³ Gender is explicitly aligned with biological reproductive sex: 'Masculinity and femininity in many Caribbean societies are commonly attributed to sex and located in "reproductive functions" and "immutable, biological facts". That is, heterosexuality is assumed to be a central component of gender identity in many people's lives'.³⁴⁴

Kempadoo's arguments are developed by Glave's assessment of the ways in which hyper-masculinity is tied to wider homogenous constructions of the Caribbean:

The Caribbean, as packaged globally for tourists, purposefully obscures quotidian (and often poor) Antillean lives – existences rendered as scant importance beyond obsequious servitude in the generally consumer-directed packaging. Lesbian and gay lives generally do not enter into this truncated representation at all, unless they surface in some momentary wink of sexual tourism.³⁴⁵

Glave's comments echo global inclinations to homogenise and stereotype Caribbean culture. Like Evaristo, Glave writes back to discourses on the Caribbean that have historically overlooked the distinctive histories, peoples and atmospheres of the individual islands that make-up 'the Caribbean' and its diaspora and the individual orientations, pursuits and interests of those people living on the separate islands. Evaristo's, Glave's and Kempadoo's respective texts are unified in their motivations to breakdown homogenised readings of Caribbean people, asking their readers to reconsider the sensibilities and nuances of a human sexuality that is not determined by nationality, race, class or any other social factor.

Evaristo's novel demonstrates the physical and psychological damage engendered by cultures of homophobia and racial discrimination. The novel contends that Barrington's motivation for sexual passing partly stems from fear of violence,

³⁴³ Kempadoo, 'Past Studies, New Directions: Constructions and Reconstructions of Caribbean Sexuality', p. 28

³⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 28

³⁴⁵ Glave, p. 4

conscious of the dangerous implications of operating 'outside of the gender norms for black men'.³⁴⁶ Glave's and Kempadoo's intersectional discourses relating to race and sexuality have noted the threat of physical violence underpinning gay men's reluctance to expose their non-normative orientation in a Caribbean context. As Glave's important work insinuates, the issues surrounding same-sex relations in the Caribbean have weighed heavily upon the gay community and have led to many gay and lesbian Caribbean subjects choosing to live abroad:

[...] racism, xenophobia, sexual and gender violence, economic stress, the need for voluntary or forced migration (as in the case of political asylum seekers), the erasing or silencing of ourselves (and in some cases, the murdering of ourselves) because of our sexualities, and more.³⁴⁷

Within the novel, Evaristo demonstrates the precariousness of being openly gay in a hyper-masculine environment. When Barrington assumes his sexuality through engaging in sexual encounters in presumed 'discreet' public spaces, he is subject to homophobic prejudice. The threat of violence attached to Barrington's racial and sexual identities is reminiscent of the scene in which police interrogate Olive in *Never Far from Nowhere*, her racial identity stirring an aggression and violence in the police that is superficially grounded:

Late at night, whenever I got the urge, I used to tell Carmel I was taking my evening constitutional, or goin' down the pub, or whatever, when in fact I was making excursions into Abney Park Cemetery. It was like wild countryside back then, with brambles, trees and hedges that provided camouflage for all kinds of covert negotiations.

This one night in 1977, at about ten o'clock, me and someone anonymous was getting to know each other, *quietly*, in the dark, with nobody else in our vicinity, minding we own business, when a gang of young ragamuffins came crashing in and jumped us. Big strong lads. Must-a been creeping around on the hunt. Bloody sports. *Cowards*. They let the other chap run off and when they saw me – a man from their father's generation.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.7

³⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.5

‘Batty man! Bum bandit! Poofter! Anti-Man!’

Before I could try to defend myself, I ended up in the foetal position on the ground, my hands tryin’ to protect my head from several pairs of boots that each bore the poundage of a steel wrecking ball.³⁴⁸

The novel quickly establishes Hackney as Barrington’s home, mapping London according to where Barrington eats his breakfast, buys his shoes and drinks his rum. The reader enjoys London vicariously through Barrington’s eyes, conscious of his command of the city and the area in which he lives. In an interview in 2015, Evaristo rejected the idea of Barrington’s trajectory revolving around a search for belonging in a London environment:

I didn’t want it to be about his sense of belonging. It touches on it briefly, but it’s very much about having already arrived – okay, he’s here, he is going to stay here, and the issue is whether he’s accepted as a gay man and whether he can come out.³⁴⁹

Evaristo’s concern over whether Barrington is ‘accepted as a gay man’ manifests itself in different ways in this scene in which he is subjected to a homophobic attack. The episode provides a reference point to gauge the ways in which Barrington’s sexuality is subject to a specific interrogation on the grounds of his race and nationality. Barrington’s alignment of himself with the attackers’ fathers’ generation would suggest that the younger men who assault him are themselves persons of Caribbean parentage. The homophobic slurs deployed by the attackers reflect the Caribbean British diaspora that Barrington suggests the men belong to. The semantics of a term like ‘Batty man’, which derives from the Jamaican word for the human posterior (‘batty’) and man, signals a specifically Caribbean form of homophobic prejudice which is appropriated in a London environment. The use of the term ‘Anti-Man’ implies a betrayal of gender that explicitly aligns masculinity with heterosexuality.

³⁴⁸ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, pp. 121-122

³⁴⁹ Gustar, p.439

The negativity surrounding this form of cultural betrayal strikes resonance with Barrington's daughters' critiques of each other's bodies. Donna scrutinises Maxine's 'modelsque' body, which in her opinion contests conventional ideals of feminine beauty in Afro-Caribbean culture: 'I'm not like Maxine, with her anorexic BMI that even black men go for these days – betraying the race'.³⁵⁰ Evaristo's presentation of the politicisation of sexuality and the human body through her depiction of both Barrington and Maxine's performances of 'passing' expose anxieties surrounding alternative frameworks through which to embody racial identities which challenge or undermine the hegemonic cultural and social spaces in which they are conventionally performed.

Barrington refers to cases of homophobic attacks repeatedly. The abhorrent violence of each description serves to remind the reader of Barrington and Morris' compulsion to pass. When Barrington reflects upon the evolution of gay culture in contemporary London, he recalls a time in the 1980s when he was witness to a brutal murder that took place on his street:

The driver had been shot [...] half his scalp was hanging off of the back of his head [...] Word on the street was that he had been cheating on his wife with a 'batty' man [...] and her gangster brother had taken revenge on him for shaming the family.³⁵¹

Again, the deployment of the term 'batty' points to a manifestation of homophobia that is rooted in Caribbean culture. Evaristo's graphic description of the victim's 'scalp [...] hanging off' demonstrates the extent to which homosexual practices within Caribbean culture provoke violence and rage. The fact that the act of vengeance is enacted by the wife's brother further problematises the crisis of masculinity, in which men perpetuate cultures of violence by reverting to vicious physical attacks to assert power and reinstate patriarchal orders. Barrington's decision to pass as heterosexual is reinforced by an acute awareness of such violent homophobic crimes which are part of both London and Caribbean life. Barrington's suppression of any

³⁵⁰ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p. 225

³⁵¹ *Ibid*, pp. 113-114

public expression of physical attraction to Morris is inevitably linked to a fear of attack:

Morris was a perfect specimen of manhood, with his polished chest and naturally pumped-up pectorals. At times like these I found it hard to keep my hands off him in public, especially when all around us males and females of the species were engaging in extreme canoodling and groping on the grass – blatantly, unashamedly, *legally*.³⁵²

At this moment in the novel, Barrington is recalling a time in the 1980s. His reference to the legality of homosexual relations reflects a contextualisation of his sexuality on Antiguan terms, where homosexuality remains illegal. The quotation demonstrates that, despite living comfortably and confidently as a Londoner for five decades, Barrington's conscience in relation to his sexuality revolves around Caribbean attitudes towards homosexuality. In his mind, sexual acts with persons of the same sex remain criminalised. As Ian Thomson's review of the novel asserts, '[a]ccording to a recent poll, 96 per cent of Jamaicans are opposed to any move to legalise homosexual relations'.³⁵³ Barrington's relocation in London as a diasporic Antiguan permits him a certain freedom to indulge in same-sex relations, but he still thinks and performs as a hyper-masculine Antiguan man and in his eyes, homosexuality remains stigmatised.

Barrington embodies McCune's description of DL figures 'who often disidentify with traditional descriptors of sexuality' to escape having to pronounce their sexual orientation as homosexual. Like DL figures, Barrington aspires to live a life with Morris founded on discretion around their sexual relationship: 'We seventy-five years ole next year, Morris. Can you believe it? Wha d'ya say we spend the fourth quarter of our cycle together – *discreetly*?'³⁵⁴ As Ellery Washington notes in his review of the novel, a tense quandary underpins Barrington's sexuality: 'a lifetime of fear and shame has kept him [Barrington] from outwardly identifying with the

³⁵² *Ibid*, p. 115

³⁵³ Ian Thomson, 'Mr Loverman by Bernardine Evaristo', *The Spectator*, 14 September 2013 [<https://www.spectator.co.uk/2013/09/mr-loverman-by-bernardine-evaristo-review/>]

³⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.43

types of men those around him call pooftahs, homos, bullers, antimen, batty boys, pansies and the like'.³⁵⁵ Barrington's denunciation of any identity attached to homosexuality reveals his discomfort with the notion and the cultural undertones affiliated with it. His prejudiced views epitomise the ways in which subjects become institutionalised by the values and conventions of the specific culture and society in which they are raised. Despite pursuing a lifelong love affair with Morris, Barrington rejects the label of 'homosexual' because of the negative connotations that Antiguan culture attaches to the term. The nuances of Barrington's sexual passing are reminiscent of Vivien's motivation to 'pass' as non-Jamaican to avoid the social and cultural connotations attached to her racial identity. Like Barrington, Vivien manipulates the ways others 'see' her through posing as 'Mauritian' or middle-class to adapt to and assimilate into particular social settings.

McCune's study exposes the anxiety around 'queerness' inherent to prejudiced voices within the African-American community, but equally articulates problematic views from the DL persons themselves: 'For the sixty men whom I spoke in this study, in both interviews and surveys, the DL was a way to articulate how they could make sense of their sexual experiences with men, without having to mark themselves as queer'.³⁵⁶ McCune's findings are twofold: firstly, his study highlights the ways in which DLs disavow their membership of the gay community and in turn perpetuate the culture of forced discretion around non-heteronormative relations in resisting living as an openly gay man for fear of being defined as 'queer'; secondly, the sentiment expressed by DL men and women conveys the productive sense of liberation brought about by passing in escaping the oppressive identity labels which societies imprint upon their subjects. Sexual passing again emerges as a strategy for survival in sexual contexts: 'The DL, like the culture of dissemblance, offers a way for men to navigate the complex web of gender, race, class and sexuality' and to transgress the expectations attached to rigid identity labels.³⁵⁷ Barrington uses sexual discretion as a coping mechanism to both avoid derailing and upsetting

³⁵⁵ Ellery Washington, 'Late Bloomer: Review of Bernardine Evaristo's *Mr Loverman*', *The New York Times*, 13 June 2014 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/15/books/review/mr-loverman-by-bernardine-evaristo.html>]

³⁵⁶ McCune, p.9

³⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p.7

familial values inherent to Antiguan culture and to evade confronting his sexuality and the uneasiness he feels about accepting his sexual inclination to men.

Evaristo purposefully presents Barrington as the archetypal older-generation Caribbean man who maintains traditional views on gender roles and sexuality inherited from a colonial Caribbean upbringing. Barrington's use of homophobic slurs is peppered with irony in their offensiveness towards the gay and lesbian community: 'Stoke Newington got dykeified too, and some of our women was at war with us *male chauvinist pigs*'.³⁵⁸ Morris astutely uncovers Barrington's hypocrisy on a number of occasions within the novel:

'I don't understand you, Barry,' Morris says, continuing his moralistic crusade. 'You hate it when Merty and that lot chat homophobic nonsense, but look at yourself.'
 'Morris, I am an individual, specific, not generic. I am no more a pooftah than I am a homo, buller or anti-man.' I start to quietly hum 'I am what I am'.
 'You homosexual, Barry,' he says, goin' po-faced on me. 'We established that fact a long time ago.'
 'Morris, dear. I ain't no homosexual, I am a... Barrysexual!'³⁵⁹

Morris' observations expose Barrington's egotistical qualities. Barrington's description of Morris' words of advice as a 'moralistic crusade' symbolises his cynicism towards being tied to any form of sexual identity. The conversation suggests that Barrington thinks that his sense of individuality renders him immune to society's compulsion to pigeonhole and categorise. While he is comfortable expressing his own explicit prejudice against the gay community, when others 'chat homophobic nonsense' he is offended. The comic irony of Barrington's choice of language ('pooftah', 'anti-man') to resist being labelled as homosexual epitomises his paradoxical nature. The coinage of the term 'Barrysexual' reflects his relentless self-promotion, coupled with a delusion surrounding the inevitability of societal identity labelling.

³⁵⁸ Evaristo, *Mr Loverman*, p. 121

³⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.155

Later in the novel, Maxine pushes her father to confront his sexuality, confessing that she always knew that Barrington and 'Uncle Morris were an item'.³⁶⁰ The revelation unsettles Barrington as he becomes increasingly anxious about the exposure of his previously 'discreet' life:

If you'd been paying attention, it would have been obvious I'd be totally cool with your homosexuality.'
The only homo I am is sapiens, dearie, but I hold my tongue. [...]
 'What I *do* have a problem with, *how-evs*, is that you've been cheating on Mum all this time. It's been bugging me for twenty years.'
 'It's not really cheating - '
 'Shuddup, Daddy. It is cheating and, from a feminist perspective, totally out of order.'³⁶¹

Barrington's discomfort with the notion of 'homosexuality' distinctly manifests itself here in his quick dismissal of Maxine's use of the term. A culture of hyper-masculinity is engrained within him, extending to the convincing of himself that he has not been disloyal to Carmel: 'It's not really cheating'. Barrington's belittling of and justification of his unfaithfulness to Carmel appears to derive from a detachment of his heterosexual life from his homosexual one. His extramarital affairs do not constitute cheating on the basis that they have not involved engaging with another woman sexually. He persuades himself that his lifelong relationship with Morris is 'not really cheating' due to the fact that it exists in an alternative realm, suggesting that if sexual encounters are not reproductive, then he doesn't consider it sex. Barrington divides his two lives unequivocally and is incapable of seeing the merging of his heterosexual life with Carmel with his homosexual life with Morris. Barrington's justification of his affairs belongs to a mind-set that perceives male sexual gratification as a biological necessity.

Maxine's revelation of her long-term awareness, and indeed acceptance, of her father's gay self is counterbalanced by Donna's later encounter with Barrington in which she states that 'I've kept it in for thirty-three years. Protecting you. Protecting

³⁶⁰ *Ibid*

³⁶¹ *Ibid*

Mum. Protecting Maxine'.³⁶² The dialogue between father and daughter is exposing on a number of levels. The fact that Donna has been aware of her father's antics since 'April 1977' disturbs Barrington's confidence in the discretion to which he has devoted his life and equally points to the idiosyncrasies of passing lives.³⁶³ Barrington's inability to 'discreetly' consistently conduct two sexual lives points to the limitations of passing. More importantly, Donna's statement awakens Barrington to the burden that his passing life has placed upon his daughters. Donna has protected Carmel from the truth precisely because it 'would have devastated her' and in doing so has lived a family life perpetually underpinned by deceit.³⁶⁴ Barrington's daughters' admissions reveal the harsh emotional implications of passing, for both the passing subject and the familial network around them.

Evaristo's novel resists appeasing its readers by offering a representation of Barrington's reconciliation with his sexuality. Barrington's 'coming out' is unplanned, confused and fueled by alcohol:

I did something even crazier the other night, this so called out thing to a group of teenage boys including my grandson. I didn't mean to do it, I just vomited the words up.
[...]
I was drunk and out control. I ain't no hero.³⁶⁵

Barrington's revelation is far from lucid, his reliance on alcohol to relinquish his inhibitions making for an awkward and tense encounter with Daniel and his friends:

Something in me snaps, the way it does when folk hold things in so long that they start acting beyond common sense, beyond reason. "Yes, I am a cock-sucker", I reply, just as quietly, just as sinisterly, not quite knowing how those words exited my mouth.³⁶⁶

³⁶² *Ibid*, p.230

³⁶³ *Ibid*

³⁶⁴ *Ibid*

³⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.260

³⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.196

The lack of control or rationality in Barrington's articulation of his sexuality contrasts with the calculated character with whom the reader has by now become familiar. The crudity of his choice of language to define himself ("I am a cock sucker") conflicts with the stylised and image-conscious lifestyle which he has cultivated. His allusion to the confession as 'vomit' accentuates the innateness of his true sexuality and suggests bodily implications of suppressing and hiding natural instincts for such a prolonged period of time. While the scene provokes a sense of chaos, Barrington's impromptu admission is equally cathartic, playing out an inevitable confrontation of self.

In the final chapters of the novel, Barrington's juxtaposing lives collide as he prepares to confess all to Carmel and start a new life with Morris as an openly gay man: 'So...just to be clear you goin' leave Carmel and move in with me, right?'³⁶⁷ Barrington's decision to cease acts of passing and assume his sexuality demands a confrontation of his true self which he finds unsettling: 'All of this gayness is starting to affect me, preparing me for a new life, and [...] helping me to come to terms with what I been fearing and hiding all my life – although I won't admit it to anyone'.³⁶⁸ Barrington's drunken announcement to Daniel and his friends initiates a cascading series of revelations which force him to accept his true sexual self: 'I made a spectacle of myself that fateful night with Daniel's hoodlums, and I got complications ahead, but I can't stop what's happening here'.³⁶⁹ I would suggest that even at this crucial stage in the novel, the damage to Barrington's ego and the inevitability of Carmel finding out about his affairs are more of a concern to him than being honest to himself and his family about his natural inclinations.

When Carmel returns home from her father's funeral in Antigua Barrington prepares himself to finally reveal his true self to his wife. His intentions are halted by Carmel's announcement that she has been made aware of Barrington's secret life:

'I found out [...] you was being talked about even from when you was at school. It just as well you married me

³⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p.245

³⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p.274

³⁶⁹ *Ibid*

when you did, but that was the whole point wasn't it?
Fifty years with a man who used me as his cover story
to protect his disgusting business.³⁷⁰

While Carmel assures Barrington that 'I'm not lonely no more', having commenced a relationship with an old school friend, Evaristo's novel again resists a neat sense of reconciliation or acceptance through her severe condemnation of Barrington's sexuality: 'You a sick man, Barry, and the only person who can help you now is God'.³⁷¹ Carmel's reaction is un-surprising, compellingly capturing the hurt and disloyalty that she feels, as well as supporting the novel's critique of religiosity as another form of narrow conformism. Her condemnation of non-heteronormative relations is an arguably justifiable product of her rage towards her husband's conduct, but equally solidifies Barrington's anxieties surrounding his sexuality in a Caribbean context

Carmel's reaction evokes an emotional reaction in Barrington, who for the first time, begins to perceive his passing on dishonest and duplicitous terms:

Wifey got to me. I felt the consequences of my actions.
I still feeling it. And I sorry. Carmel, I sorry.
I even wrote her a letter of apology, but what good a
letter do when someone's been cheated out of
happiness so long, eh?
I got to carry that with me for the rest of my life, because,
no matter what excuses I made, leaving her would-a
been the honest thing to do, at least once Maxine turned
eighteen. Duty done.³⁷²

Barrington's acceptance of having cheated Carmel 'out of happiness' reflects a move away from his own selfish pursuit of pleasure and a new awareness of the consequences of his actions. The sense of duty and patriarchal order which Barrington had previously leaned upon to validate his staying with Carmel is reassessed and he appears to acknowledge the implications of deceiving a woman who had devoted her life to him. Barrington's confidence and swagger recedes in

³⁷⁰*Ibid*, p.279

³⁷¹*Ibid*, p.280

³⁷²*Ibid*, p.305

the final pages of the book, his daughters' and wife's reactions prompting him to reflect upon his act of passing in new ways. The culmination of Barrington's passing renders the act fairly unsuccessful; while passing enables him to pursue the lifestyle that he craves, the deceit and deception inherent to living two lives simultaneously cheats those around him and himself 'out of happiness'. The sense of guilt that afflicts Barrington conveys a shift in his attitudes towards his acts of passing, no longer perceiving it as a means of liberating himself but as a source of anguish and upset to those around him.

Perils and Possibilities of Passing

This chapter has sought to contribute to the thesis' commitment to attending to the complexities of performed identities in London novels to think about the ways in which gender, race and sexuality are fashioned through acts of passing. The analysis of Vivien, Olive and Barrington's experiences in the city demonstrates the different ways in which race, gender and sexuality are read and recognised within London environments. Vivien and Barrington's passing has been read alongside instances of racially motivated and homophobic violence in an environment in which interpretations of racial or sexual identities can have detrimental repercussions. In particular, the police's treatment of Olive in one of the final scenes in *Never Far from Nowhere* functions as a reminder of the alarming prejudice that persists within the city. The encounter demonstrates the precariousness of attitudes towards surface identity labels in particular social scenarios and reverberates through any consideration of Barrington and Vivien's rationale for passing.

There are some important parallels to be drawn between Vivien and Barrington's acts of passing. Vivien's passing manifests itself in a more subtle and nuanced manner. The close analysis of the two extracts from *Never Far from Nowhere* present improvised and spontaneous acts of passing that derive from a desire to 'fit in' within the social setting in which Vivien finds herself. By comparison, Barrington's double-life conveys a more permanent state of passing which enables him to uphold a public image and pursue a contrary private life. Yet, Barrington and Vivien's

motivations to pass are shared in their desire to digress the social and cultural connotations attached to their supposedly true selves, in the case of Vivien, her race and social positioning, and in the case of Barrington, his sexuality. Peggy Phelan's work on the politics of performances assists in understanding Barrington and Vivien's discretion in integrating into their preferred communities:

Driving the mechanism of these performed identities is a need to blend in, not to be noticed. The power of the "unseen" community lies in its ability to cohere outside the system of observation which seeks to patrol it.³⁷³

As Phelan's statement suggests, passing subjects profit from an individual capacity to navigate different identity groups and nullify society's reading of racial, social, gendered and sexual identities. Barrington's motivation to pass as heterosexual is connected to Vivien's decision to pose as Mauritian in the first extract in the pub and a child of a middle-class Islington upbringing in the second extract at art college. Phelan's analysis reinforces Barrington and Vivien's desire to pass in a society which upholds normative whiteness and normative heterosexuality. The urge to integrate themselves, 'blend in', as Phelan terms it, emerges as a strategy to resist being seen and assessed as a subject who is marginal or 'other'.

As the engagement with both Levy's *Never Far from Nowhere* and Evaristo's *Mr Loverman* establishes, the 'discretion' attached to acts of passing can manifest itself as simultaneously deceptive and liberating. In the case of both Vivien and Barrington, the pursuit of discretion involves deceiving those around them and cultivating an alternative self, escaping the judgements imposed upon the identity categories to which they belong. Barrington's 'discretion' is ultimately far from discreet as the reader learns that his sexual identity is no secret to either of his daughters. Nevertheless, his long-term unfaithfulness to his wife Carmel and pursuit of another sexual life away from his family home is problematic. Barrington approaches his passing in a casual and complacent manner which overlooks the suffering that his absence from home and dishonesty to his wife causes. A sense of

³⁷³ Peggy Phelan, 'The Golden Apple: Jennie Livingstone's *Paris is Burning*' in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.93

erroneous pride pervades his ability to pass, ignoring the implications of masquerading as something he is not has on Morris, Carmel and his daughters, Maxine and Donna. While Barrington's act of passing liberates him from his own anxieties around his sexuality and the cultural and gendered discrimination attached to it, it equally misleads and deceives those who he holds dearest, including himself.

Evaristo and Levy's representation of manifestations of passing are in dialogue with Nella Larsen, who dedicated her literary career to exposing the rationale behind passing and recording the complex and often troubled trajectories of passing subjects. Larsen's novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing* call into question a subject's compulsion to pass, re-inflecting her character's decision to 'deceive' those around them back onto society. Larsen's presentation of the fated 'tragic mulatta' figure has provided me with a productive platform from which to query society's relentless insistence on upholding homogenous cultural and social values attached to race, gender and class. Evaristo and Levy's characters inherit the same challenges of belonging which Larsen's characters face. Both Vivien and Barrington's acts of passing arise as a result of anxiety or fear of exposing their true selves to an audience who they feel will inevitably judge and condemn them on the basis of presuppositions about their racial, social or sexual selves. Ninety-years after Larsen first published *Quicksand*, writers such as Evaristo and Levy are still working through the condemning preconceptions attached to identity category labels which lead a subject to deny their true selfhood.

The social mobility inevitably attached to my consideration of passing in this chapter is countered by questioning the moment in which passing becomes immobilizing. The sense of denying one's true self renders a passing subject a quasi-being. The liminal qualities underpinning acts of passing suggest that the lives of passing subjects are never fully fulfilled. Vivien's years at Art College are spent negotiating peers' expectations of her as a middle-class Islington student and she never feels confident in assuming her true self. At the end of the novel, she remains

caught in-between two worlds, unsure 'where else I would fit.'³⁷⁴ Likewise, in spite of Barrington's 'coming-out' at the end of *Mr Loverman*, he remains riddled with guilt over his acts of deception and appears to remain uncomfortable with accepting his sexual self. The productive and problematic quandary of passing remains unresolved. Levy and Evaristo's novels demonstrate the psychological, emotional and social complexities bought about by passing, questioning whether the liberation attached to it outweighs the instability, emotional insecurity and deception which acts of passing demand.

This sense of being caught in-between relates to the wider quandary facing all subjects in that subjectivity itself is always in process, relational and ongoing. The tensions underpinning a construction of selfhood in spite of these factors is further explored in the next chapter in which I explore Evans' and Evaristo's representation of belonging an un-belonging in London.

³⁷⁴ Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, p.281

Chapter Four

**Belonging and Un-belonging in London:
Representations of *Home* in Diana Evans' *26a* and Bernardine Evaristo's *The
Emperor's Babe***

This chapter considers definitions of home in Evans' *26a* and Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* to explore psychological and emotional implications of belonging and un-belonging. Drawing upon debates surrounding representations of home within postcolonial studies, I critique scholarship's tendency to read manifestations of belonging and un-belonging in black British writing according to discourses around migration, displacement or an identity of otherness.

The main body of the chapter explores representations of home in Evans' *26a*. Engaging with patterns of migration within the city, the chapter examines *26a*'s mapping of London, which re-writes familiar migration narratives on a smaller scale, contextualising the psychological effects generated by migration to localised and microcosmic environments. The discussion reads the novel's presentation of Neasden, a suburban area in northwest London, as an urban microcosm to understand Londoners' strategies for forging a sense of belonging in a city which encompasses an extensive range of cultures, communities and identities. I suggest that Evans proposes psychological and imaginatively driven alternative constructions of home. The analysis focuses on Evans' conceptualisation of the belonging attached to sisterhood and, more specifically, twinning, which emerges as a paradigm of home for the protagonists of the novel, identical twins Bessi and Georgia.

The second section of the chapter explores representations of London as home in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*. The thesis opened with a consideration of Zuleika's 'unofficial' mapping of London and concludes with a consideration of her and her family's construction of belonging in their home city. An examination of representations of belonging and un-belonging in Evaristo's meta-historical Roman Londinium traces the historical polyculturalism of the city and characters' sense of

'feeling at home' in it. *The Emperor's Babe's* excavation of the historical and cultural foundations of London opens up a dialogue regarding hegemonic constructions of national belonging and re-awakens readers to the intersection of cultures, traditions and peoples inherent to the city's past. In forging connections between *The Emperor's Babe* and *26a*, the analysis considers microcosmic definitions of home and the novels' presentation of what I term, 'a London-centric sense of belonging'.

Belonging and Un-belonging in London: Representations of *Home* in Diana Evans' *26a*

*Home was homeless. It could exist anywhere,
because its only substance was familiarity.*³⁷⁵

Within contemporary London literature, black British writers continue to negotiate the problematic possibilities of constructing a sense of home within a society that persistently contends that they are 'not of here'.³⁷⁶ Representations of home in black British novels have consistently been the object of postcolonial critical attention, which has traditionally contextualised this work according to notions of un-belonging. Such critiques have limited interpretations of texts by authors who are both black and British to the discursive trends shaped by these labels. 'The imagination of academics and critics,' Mike Phillips argues, 'seemed to confine black British work to critiques which privileged notions of the outsider, the alien, the exile', which overlook the opportunity to expand definitions of this literature and its relationship with wider cultural and political spheres.³⁷⁷ As Salman Rushdie asserts, 'literature is not in the business of copyrighting certain themes for certain groups'.³⁷⁸ Continuing to read contemporary black British writing simply as narratives of un-belonging hinders the emergence of a more varied and inclusive identity for contemporary London writing that forges connections between authors' presentation of the city across the social, gendered and racial literary spectrum.

The discussion that follows explores and re-presents ideas that derive from postcolonial scholarship's engagement with black British writers' depiction of home to explore ambivalent, complex, and nuanced representations of belonging and un-belonging in *26a*. The chapter positions the text within a critical framework distinct from earlier approaches to the work, so as to assess Evans' representation of her characters' engagement with London as both a meeting point for individuals in search of belonging and a nexus between belonging and un-belonging.

³⁷⁵ Evans, *26a*, p.54

³⁷⁶ Kadija Sesay, 'Introduction' in *Write Black, Write British* (Hertford: Hansib, 2005), p.16

³⁷⁷ Phillips, p.14

³⁷⁸ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism* (London: Granta, 1992), p.15

Assessing *26a* as a London text expands upon Alison Donnell's assertion that 'being black does not mean being defined by race'.³⁷⁹ Evans' novel challenges interpretations of attachments to specific 'motherlands' in black British literature, widening definitions of home in such writing. Evans consciously moves away from the politics of home—usually associated with notions of borders, origins, and power—and towards the psychology of home, to think it as a more fluid and visceral space. The text explores and enriches an understanding of what home can be in an intricate, fast-paced, and often intimidating contemporary urban environment such as London. *26a* offers an alternative model, moving away from the idea of belonging and un-belonging as incompatible spheres and offering a new twenty-first century model that promotes a 'settled' state of psychological and psychosomatic *in-between-ness* as a strategy for survival in one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities.

Postcolonial literary contexts focus on the sense of disorientation generated by migration and displacement from home. The publication of so-called 'Windrush narratives' in the mid-twentieth century recorded the migration of Caribbean former colonial subjects to London in search of work and opportunity.³⁸⁰ Texts such as *The Lonely Londoners* initiated timely and important dialogues, narrating Moses' and his boys' struggle to assimilate in a post-war London that alienated black migrants. The Caribbean community that settled in post-war London struggled to forge a strong construction of home in a society that insisted that they did not belong and as Caryl Phillips notes, Selvon's work reverberates 'uncomfortable anxieties of longing and not belonging'.³⁸¹ This conceptualisation of home is intertwined with memory, nostalgia, and displacement from the homeland and, according to Rushdie, reflects the negotiation of a colonial past with a postcolonial future. Rushdie conjures the image of sitting at his north London desk imagining *his* India: 'I knew that my India may only have been one to which I (who am no longer what I was, and who by quitting Bombay never became what perhaps I was meant to be) was, let us

³⁷⁹ Alison Donnell, 'Afterword: In Praise of a Black British Canon and the Possibilities of Representing the Nation "Otherwise" in *A Black British Canon*, (Eds.) Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.202

³⁸⁰ See Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: Harper Collins, 2009)

³⁸¹ Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 234

say, willing to admit I belonged'.³⁸² His observations note the distinction between definitions of home as the place of origin and the psychological and imaginative complexities attached to *feeling at home*. This analysis establishes the foundational ideas behind this chapter's consideration of *26a*'s model of home, one that emphasises the profundity of psychological conceptualisations of home versus physical manifestations of it.

Donnell positions the emergence of Caribbean writing in English in the 1950s and 1960s as both a productive and problematic development in British literary discourse. As she indicates, 'while the establishment of these Anglophone traditions has been central in terms of foregrounding particular regional archives of postcolonial writings, it has also—albeit unwittingly—facilitated a false separation between postcolonial and British writings'.³⁸³ Donnell encapsulates the tension underpinning black British writing: scholarship's historical difficulty in attending to literature that simultaneously belongs to a British and a postcolonial tradition and has played an often overlooked crucial role in the trajectory of London writing. Black British writers who were born, raised, and educated in Britain are expected to represent an alternative view and an arguably unique perspective as a consequence of their racial and cultural heritage or parentage. As Sesay notes, despite writers of this generation often 'feeling' British, they remain pigeonholed and compelled to prioritise their 'hybridity' or 'otherness'.³⁸⁴ While critics tend to approach black writers born in Britain as spokespeople for their race, Sesay notes that 'it is not always because they want it that way, but because they are forced into it'.³⁸⁵ As the introduction to this thesis asserts, literature by black British writers, and even more so by black women writers, is too often subject to racialised or gendered discourses.

26a re-presents familiar postcolonial narratives of displacement and dislocation, channeling them on a smaller scale by contextualizing the effects generated by departure and migration within Neasden as a microcosm of London. The novel represents the inter-racial Hunter family, living in a polycultural city in which

³⁸² Rushdie, p.10

³⁸³ Donnell, p.191

³⁸⁴ Sesay, p.16

³⁸⁵ *Ibid*

inhabitants' lived experiences are not shaped solely by race, projecting a welcomingly everyday vision of familial London existence. As John McLeod notes, a comforting sense of the familiar pervades the text: 'for much of the narrative *26a* is not a transformative drama of diasporic routes but a catalogue of commonplace routines'.³⁸⁶ Aside from the twins' frustration with their hairdresser's inability to overcome the 'challenges posed by afros', the dynamics of race rarely infiltrate Hunter family life.³⁸⁷

Counterpoising a lack of nuance in critical readings of this work, McLeod suggests that *26a* maps London as a city that appears to uphold a 'post-racial way of thinking'.³⁸⁸ The term has proven politically and culturally divisive in recent years, particularly in an American context in which the election of the nation's first African-American president in 2008 generated cause for optimism around building a post-racial society. Barack Obama's historic election to power was preceded by a premiership which contended with mass riots protesting the killing of black men by white police officers, the rise of support for white supremacy movements and increasingly fragile and tense race relations.³⁸⁹ As the precariousness of the deployment of the term in a contemporary American context makes clear, proposing the early twenty-first century as a post-racial era is potentially premature. Nevertheless, in the case of *26a* and Evans' representation of London, notions of the post-racial are pertinent to the presentation of a capital which has worked through and beyond the racial tensions which underpinned the experiences of previous generations of Londoners, such as Levy.

Evans challenges preconceived ideas of black British women's writing by offering a nuanced narrative of London life that is propelled by her own distinct concerns. As an artist, Evans rejects the burden to stand as a spokesperson for both her race and gender, which was imposed upon generations of women writers before her. Her literary strategies are closely connected to Zadie Smith, often heralded as *the* black

³⁸⁶ McLeod, "Extra Dimensions, New Routines", *Wasafiri*, 25:4 (2010) [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02690066.2010>], p.47

³⁸⁷ Evans, *26a*, p.42

³⁸⁸ McLeod, p.47

³⁸⁹ See Ta-Nehisi Coates, 'My President was Black' in *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017), pp.291-339

British writer of her generation. Like Smith, Evans encourages her readers to re-think representations of race, echoing Smith's sentiments over changing readers' preconceptions of representing black characters in the modern British novel: 'it's very difficult to find a way to get people out of that mindset, so that they can see that people of color are not strange or exotic in themselves, or to themselves'.³⁹⁰ According to the 2011 census, over 50% of London's population were recorded as non-'White British' and yet as Smith's comments demonstrate, the representation of white British characters in contemporary British literature is considered the norm.³⁹¹

My reading of Evans' text is supported by Smith's stance on the sociocultural politics of black women's writing. Smith is opposed to the idea of black women writers' work striking empathy solely with readers who share specific gendered or racial identities: 'Like all readers, I want my limits to be drawn by my own sensibilities, not by my melanin count'.³⁹² Smith's criticism of discourses which 'make black women the privileged readers of a black woman writer' resonates with the tone and character of Evans' novel, which stretches beyond tensions brought about by identity politics to represent the dynamic and evolving contemporary city.³⁹³ Such interpretations of the novel are reinforced by Irene Perez-Fernandez's commentary on *26a* in which she argues that:

Evans rejects the categorization of her novel as a depiction of a multicultural, mixed-race London society and denounces certain expectations of Black writing [...] there is a reluctance to be considered as a "Black writer" for whom race and ethnicity have to be at the core of her literary production.³⁹⁴

³⁹⁰Charlotte Higgins, 'Zadie Smith returns to her native London for her fourth novel', *The Guardian*, 12 August 2012 [<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/26/zadie-smith-london-fourth-novel>]

³⁹¹Based on statistics published in the 2011 census, 'Ethnicity and Religion Statistics', *Institute of Race Relations* [<http://www.irr.org.uk/research/statistics/ethnicity-and-religion/>]

³⁹²Smith, 'Their Eyes Were Watching God: *What Does Soulful Mean?*', p. 10

³⁹³*Ibid*

³⁹⁴Irene Perez-Fernandez, 'Embodying "twoness in oneness" in Diana Evan's *26a*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 49:3 (2013), p.291

Perez-Fernandez's analysis echoes Donnell's rejection of defining the work by black British writers according to their race which more widely reflects the agenda of this thesis.³⁹⁵ Evans' and Smith's motivations are shared; both write back to historically 'othered' and 'exotic' representations of black characters to respond to the disparity between black Londoners and the under-representation of their lives in the contemporary London novel.

McLeod's application of the post-racial to *26a* proves useful in posing questions concerning Evans' conscious or subconscious decision to not make raced identities the focus of the text. Evans' representation of the twins' coming of age narrative suggests that their mixed racial identity is not an impediment to their everyday lived experiences. Unlike Levy's *Every Light in the House Burning* and *Never Far from Nowhere*, which present the overt racism embedded within 1970s-1980s London society, *26a* maps London as a cultural space which is inevitably hybrid and cosmopolitan. The text establishes an acceptance of the polycultural nature of the city, promoting an image of the contemporary capital as home to individuals who originate from a wide-ranging spectrum of contexts, environments and locations. McLeod's post-racial reading charts the novel's move away from the literary conventions identified with 'black British' writing, noting, for example, the fact that the twins' 'search for belonging' does not revolve around a negotiation of their mixed black and white ancestry. The atmosphere cultivated by Evans' novel is one that reflects an urban environment which resists defining its inhabitants according to identity-categories, setting racial consciousness aside to forge a space to investigate the other social, cultural and psychological factors which contribute to a person's construction of belonging. Evans treatment of the twins' mixed-race parentage, then, is secondary to the presentation of the impact their twinness and sisterly bond has upon their sense of belonging. She underplays the dimension of race in the telling of Bessi and Georgia's stories to focus on the uniquely special belonging that derives from the bond between two sisters who happen to be mixed-race.

³⁹⁵ See Donnell, 'Afterword: In Praise of a Black British Canon and the Possibilities of Representing the Nation 'Otherwise'', p.202

My interpretation of the term post-racial in relation to Evans' text is an ambivalent one. I fully agree with McLeod's assertion that Evans succeeds in depicting a London that is organically, rather than systematically, hybrid, shifting into a literary realm 'that takes us quite a distance past the familiar preoccupations of Black British writing'.³⁹⁶ Furthermore, a post-racial interpretation of *26a* reinforces this thesis' ambition to disrupt contrived readings of work by black British women writers according to the identity-categories through which the writers are too often defined. Nevertheless, a quandary underlining Evans' representation of this London remains. The question of whether this depiction of London is an authentic representation of the contemporary city or whether it is a shrewd and indeed, justifiable, literary strategy through which to avoid foreseeable racial and gendered critiques of the novel, is answered to some extent by Evans response to a question posed by Evaristo regarding the 'absence of racism' in the twins' lives:

It's because they do live in a very ethereal world and they are disconnected from reality to a certain extent. The darkness and danger in their family, which comes mainly from their father, gives the twins a different agenda, so the idea of being mixed-race, or the idea of race itself, isn't as urgent to them as the idea of what it's like living with a dangerous father, or living with a distant mother. [...] I want to write about human experiences and universal experiences rather than write about what it means to be black or mixed-race.³⁹⁷

Evans' explanation reinforces a reading which refocuses the lens through which readers perceive black or mixed-race characters. As her answer makes clear, the novel seeks to move beyond the boundaries of racial identities to address the everyday familial challenges that arise from living with a father afflicted with alcoholism and a mother who increasingly retreats into an otherworldly realm. In spite of this, I remain wary of the way the 'post-racial' may mask the enduring prejudices which persist in everyday London life. At the same time, I celebrate a work such as *26a* which masterfully steers the reader past preoccupations

³⁹⁶ McLeod, p.48

³⁹⁷ Evans quoted in 'Diana Evans in conversation with Bernardine Evaristo', p.33

surrounding racial identity to offer new psychological insights into black and mixed-race women characters' 'human' and 'universal experiences'.

The inter-racial identity of the Hunter family is presented as neither unique nor of huge importance. Through the representation of the experiences of the protagonists, Bessi and Georgia, Evans challenges the assertion that the social markers connected to identity categories define an individual sense of place in the world. My own reading of Evans' representation of the twins' construction of belonging is very much in dialogue with Samantha Reive Holland's study of 'cosmopolitan belonging' in *26a*, which reinforces my sense of the twins' being at home in London: 'The young protagonists of *26a* do not struggle to find themselves represented or voiced within London's late 20th-century milieu – on the contrary, London is their city which they navigate with confidence'.³⁹⁸ I agree with this interpretation in that *26a* presents a worldview that discourages the reader to succumb to familiar stereotypes of migrant experience.

Evans' presentation of the twins' lives orientates around the domestic realm and the nuances of sisterhood – their relationship with London and the wider world begins with, and is grounded in, their family home. Evans' description of the family's hamster, Ham, in the opening pages of the novel, introduces the reader to the microcosmic world that the novel creates. Much to Georgia and Bessi's dismay, Ham is described as being 'trapped in a cage next to the dishwasher' and they do 'everything they could' to ease the loneliness they fear he feels, 'alone with a wheel on a wasteland of wood shavings and newspaper'.³⁹⁹ Evans' description of the love and care they demonstrate for Ham compellingly captures a child outlook on the world, emphasising the novel's portrayal of the everyday 'dilemmas' of domestic life in contrast to the political issues raised by, for example, Levy's earlier works. In choosing to depict the twins' concerns as revolving around domestic, banal familial life, Evans departs from the more familiar themes and conventions that characterise an earlier generation of writers. The tensions that arise from the twins' un-

³⁹⁸ Samantha Reive Holland, 'Home had a way of shifting': Cosmopolitan belonging in Diana Evans's *26a*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53:5 (2017), p.558

³⁹⁹ Evans, *26a*, pp.4-5

belonging do not so much derive from their dual racial and cultural heritage but rather from their departure from their Neasden home, family, and, most notably, each other. McLeod notes the text's re-writing of postcolonial notions of belonging, emphasising the influence that family life has upon the twins' sense of self and belonging:

The twins are not depicted struggling primarily with their identities as mixed-race Britons; the novel does not overtly explore the problems of a Black British community; the London of the novel is not a visibly prejudicial or discriminatory environment. Instead, Evans wittily portrays the domestic lives of the Hunters as unspectacularly aligned with the public travails of national happenings, and removes a sense of disjunction between subjective and public affairs.⁴⁰⁰

McLeod eloquently articulates the novel's re-orientation of the Hunter family's expected political affiliations, moving away from ideas of 'homeland' and Britain as a 'host' nation for the twins' Nigerian mother, Ida, to emphasise common human attachments to family, a childhood home, and a local area. He suggests that Evans' text defines home through the sense of comfort and security affiliated with the familiar.

As stated in the introduction, I am interested in exploring the notion of biological and ideological sisterhood to understand psychosomatic constructions of home. Bessi and Georgia nurture their concept of home through personal reference points, namely Neasden, the loft at 26 Waifer Avenue (their bedroom at the top of the Hunter family home), and each other. Evans deploys subtle literary devices to point to the complexity of constructions of home: the semantics of 'Waifer' signifies a fragility that reinforces the insecure depictions of home presented in the novel. Ida and Aubrey's detached parenting reinforces the atmosphere of otherworldliness symbolised by 26 Waifer Avenue and as Scafe suggests, the house 'reflects and is defined by the parents' seeming incomprehension at the family they have created

⁴⁰⁰ McLeod, p.47

and by the children's encounters with the culture of everyday'.⁴⁰¹ The house's disconnection from everyday London life is reinforced by the twins' infatuation with the loft, which echoes images of attics as archetypal spaces of female 'madness'. In this context, Evans appropriates the idea of the loft space as a site of female psychological freedom and non-conformity from canonical texts within the British women's writing tradition such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and texts by postcolonial women writers such as Jean Rhys' *Wilde Sargasso Sea*.⁴⁰²

The twins' understanding of home—localised and microcosmic—speaks to Londoners' strategies for forging a sense of belonging in a city that encompasses an extensive range of cultures, communities and identities. Bessi and Georgia's microcosmic construction of home enables them to manage and negotiate a feeling of belonging in an urban environment that can be both overwhelming and intimidating. The twins' microcosmic definitions of home convey intense emotional attachments to Neasden and their family home through their twinness: their 'twoness in oneness'.⁴⁰³ The twins' twoness in oneness refers to their unique consciousness as twins, a psychosomatic connection that ties them to one another, even when they are apart. Perez-Fernandez's definition of the term as coming 'from a single soul that is embodied in two different human beings at the same time' conveys the novel's presentation of the twins' unique bond.⁴⁰⁴ As Evans notes, twoness in oneness protects the twins from challenges posed by the real world: 'the close relationship of the twins acts as a shield, and when it is working it means they can be happy and not affected by what's happening around them'.⁴⁰⁵ Bessi and Georgia's departure from 26a, exploration of the wider city, and subsequent separation from each other thereby confuse and disrupt their constitution and Georgia, the eldest of the twins by forty-five minutes, experiences difficulties in fashioning a sense of belonging independent from her sister and 26a. As a twin herself, Evans adopts twinness as a conceptual paradigm through which to explore

⁴⁰¹ Scafe, 'Unsettling the Centre: Black British Fiction' in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1970 – Present*, (Eds.) Mary Eagleton and Emma Parker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.221

⁴⁰² See Susan M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 2000)

⁴⁰³ Evans, *26a*, p.42

⁴⁰⁴ Perez-Fernandez, p.294

⁴⁰⁵ Evans quoted in Evaristo, p.33

individual and collective definitions of home: 'Most people build armour to protect themselves from other people but when you're a twin, everything's stripped down. You know each other so intimately and you don't have that armour'.⁴⁰⁶ The language revolving around protection, shielding and armour, which Evans deploys in her consideration of twinness explains the sense of disorientation that surfaces as a result of the twins' migration from each other and 26a.

Microcosmic London

The novel describes Neasden as 'a little hilly place next to a river and a motorway with nodding trees and one stubby row of shops'.⁴⁰⁷ The Hunter family's lives are firmly anchored in Neasden, situating it as a place detached from London: 'It was only very occasionally that the Hunters ventured past Kilburn because most of the things that they needed could be bought from Brent Cross, which had all the shops.' The novel presents London from an outsider's perspective, as a separate entity, a larger and more intimidating place that exists in a realm outside the Hunter's everyday lives: 'London needed its Neasdens to make the Piccadilly lights, the dazzling Strand, the pigeons at Trafalgar Square and the Queen waving from her Buckingham Palace balcony seem exciting'.⁴⁰⁸ When Georgia leaves home as a young adult and migrates to Tottenham, approximately eleven miles east on the North Circular Road, she is disconcerted by the roaring sounds of London traffic: 'the rumble of the Tottenham traffic spread into Georgia's head . . . It was London in a way that Neasden was not'.⁴⁰⁹ The text's depiction of Neasden reflects the socio-geographic operations of the modern metropolis, in the sense that the area is defined by the local that simultaneously provides refuge to and demarcates inhabitants in the urban landscape.

⁴⁰⁶ Evans quoted in Zoe Paxton,

⁴⁰⁷ Evans, *26a*, p.9

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid*

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p.191

The division between London and residential communities such as Neasden becomes clear early in the novel through the Hunter family's engagement with the wedding of Diana Spencer and Prince Charles. The text emphasises the importance of the 1981 royal wedding through the description of the crowd awaiting Diana Spencer's arrival at St. Paul's Cathedral as consisting of 'half of England'.⁴¹⁰ Rather than joining the crowd however the Hunter family views the event taking place just eight miles from Neasden on the television, 'along with the rest of the world in the cameras'.⁴¹¹ The twins' description of Diana stepping down from the carriage, 'her tiara . . . leaping with diamonds,' is reminiscent of a princess in a fairy-tale, emphasising the juxtaposition between illusion and reality and between the majestic depiction of London and the everyday routine of Neasden life: 'Diana Spencer steps down from the glass carriage, holding her skirts, and lifts her head in a way she has of still keeping it down . . . the universe is watching her'.⁴¹² The Hunters join the millions of families globally who watched the event on television, consuming a version of regal London, embodied by magnificent images of Buckingham Palace, Pall Mall, and St. James' Park, that offers an escape from the challenges posed by everyday urban life:

Most of Neasden were inside the cameras . . . the folk of Neasden stayed at home. That year there were other things to think about. The Brent depression and the increase in muggings down the alley that led to the shops, the roadworks on Parkview and, for the Little Ones, how they'd get ice cream if the ice-cream van's speaker wasn't working, which it wasn't.⁴¹³

Here, the text re-inflects hegemonic snapshots of London to depict the authentic everyday city that inhabitants encounter with the localised issues that shape the Hunters' lives feeling disconnected from the vision of their city presented through the television. The twins' concern over the broken ice-cream van's speaker appears endearingly mundane in comparison to the theatre and extravagance of the royal wedding, the listing suggesting an equivalence in the cultural value of a royal

⁴¹⁰ Evans, *26a*, p.15

⁴¹¹ *Ibid*

⁴¹² *Ibid*

⁴¹³ *Ibid*, p.16

wedding and ice-cream. Neasden's engagement with the royal wedding conveys the tension between prevalent representations of a cohesive city, projected to tourists and to the rest of the world, and the reality of the city functioning as a series of smaller, localised micro-communities. The sheer size, diversity and gregarious character of London renders the formation of a sense of belonging within the city difficult and the Hunter family's response to this seemingly overwhelming challenge is to conceptualise home in more manageable terms, on smaller, microcosmic scales.

In a subsequent scene, the twins venture out of Neasden and travel to Charing Cross via the Jubilee line. Bessi and Georgia have devised a business plan to bake and sell flapjacks under the name, 'The Famous Flapjack Twins' and decide to travel 'to the city' in the hope of branching out beyond Neasden and seeking opportunities to sell more flapjacks. Their encounter with central London is presented in opposition to the 'green spaces' of suburban London.⁴¹⁴ The extract contextualises Georgia's unbelonging in the city through her emotional reaction to what she sees as a hostile urban environment:

As the tube raged through tunnels Georgia and Bessie saw themselves in the world of black windows, fuzzy girls in bright tops, their lives getting quicker. They got off at Charing Cross and walked through Trafalgar Square to Piccadilly Circus. Pedestrians yelped beneath the towering walls of lights clutching bags of shopping and trying to overtake. Double-deckers smirked and puffed out fumes which people stepped into, women with bare legs in thick bracelets of smoke.⁴¹⁵

The personification of the city as a smirking, snarling beast presents an image of London that is reminiscent of a predator, immersing its prey in 'smog,' 'fumes,' and 'thick bracelets of smoke' before completely consuming it. Repeated onomatopoeic verbs such as 'raged,' 'snarled,' and 'puffed' characterise the city as an antagonistic and threatening beast. The changing dynamics of colour, shifting from green spaces to the murky grey and black qualities of the fog and smoke, depict London as a bleak and suffocating urban jungle. The imagery creates an impression of commotion and

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.128

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp.128-129

discomfort, invoking synesthetic sounds of cacophonous thunder, traffic, and chattering voices and visions of smog and pedestrians overtaking one another, dashing around the streets.

The scene provokes feelings of fear and vulnerability in Georgia that distinguish her from her twin sister Bessi. This description of the city implies that Georgia feels overwhelmed and uncomfortable in this bustling urban environment, prompting her to recall an earlier occurrence, when she was separated from her family at the Leicester Square funfair and was forced to retreat and hide underneath a funfair gimmick. Georgia's recollection of this childhood memory at this moment denotes the distress and trepidation that an encounter with central London stirs in her. The garishness of the funfair prop, an 'orange polka-dot horse with wings,' contrasts with Georgia's 'crouched' position, further emphasising the perpetrator-victim dynamic played out between Georgia and this manifestation of London.⁴¹⁶ Georgia's attempt to camouflage herself underneath the 'fantasy beast' accentuates the image of her as defenceless prey, hiding from the 'beast out there', the predator who continues to hunt outside. Georgia's childhood memory serves to emphasise the trauma and fear that she associates with the commotion of the city. Her migration from Neasden provokes a sense of displacement and disorientation that is both unsettling and foreboding. Georgia's instinctive reaction to early encounters with the noise, hustle, and chaos characteristic of central London anticipates her later retreat into herself and detachment from the city in which she was born and raised.

Georgia's anxiety appears to be induced by a removal from nature and movement towards sites typical of urban landscapes, foreshadowing her later desire to escape London and its chaos: 'I've had enough of London. It's no place to live . . . it's all madness and choking'.⁴¹⁷ Nature enriches Georgia's sense of belonging - as a child she gains security and stability through establishing a meticulous routine to tend to the roses in the garden at Waifer Avenue. Georgia appears to be reassured by the cyclical consistency of nature, comforted by the need to nurse her roses '*every day*'

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.129

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.178

to ensure their longevity.⁴¹⁸ Later, while Bessi is away in St. Lucia, Georgia attempts to soothe her loneliness by devising a plan to build an allotment and 'grow something', investing in nature to create life and compensate for the loss she feels in her separation from her twin sister.⁴¹⁹ The aptly-named 'evergreen' tree in the garden emerges as a stoic symbol of her emotional attachment to nature. The letter correspondence between Georgia and Bessi during their time apart conveys the importance of this tree as a metaphor for their bond, each sister repeatedly signing off their letter with the phrase, 'let's go to the evergreen soon'.⁴²⁰ The evergreen tree functions as a physical and psychosomatic meeting-spot for the twins when they are away from each other and equally epitomises Georgia's unbending faith in nature. The text situates its allusion to the comfort and belonging that Georgia gains from nature in opposition to the un-belonging engendered by distance from Neasden, the garden, and, most notably, 26a.

The whole thing was getting out of control. They were losing their home. They were losing Christmas⁴²¹

While the novel is predominately set in London, the Hunter family also travels to and lives for a short time in Sekon, Nigeria, under circumstances that prompt seismic psychological shifts in the twins' thinking about home.

The twins' mother Ida was born in Nigeria and met their English father Aubrey there when he was working abroad. Aubrey and Ida's previous encounters with Lagos represent a search for belonging that extends across the Hunter family. More specifically, Aubrey and Ida's attitudes towards home are reflected in their individual decisions to leave their familial homes in search of opportunities and experiences that took them beyond their current reality. As young adults, neither felt settled or content in the homes they shared with their families and communities, and both left in the hope of obtaining belonging elsewhere:

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.47

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.138

⁴²⁰ *Ibid*, p.141

⁴²¹ *Ibid*, p.41

Aubrey dreamed of another kind of escape, not from a future, but from a past. He and Ida met somewhere in the middle, in Lagos, a hundred miles from Aruwa and three thousand miles from Bakewell (because the past was a lot further to run from).⁴²²

The meeting of a young man from Yorkshire, England and a young woman from Aruwa, Nigeria in Lagos points to the transcultural power of cities to bring individuals together. Their meeting in Lagos, described as ‘somewhere in the middle’, epitomises an *in-between-ness*, the meeting-point between belonging and un-belonging that is intrinsic to the Hunter family’s experiences. Aubrey and Ida’s trajectories are far from unique. Their gravitation towards Lagos, a modern, lively, highly-populated metropolis that brings together individuals in search of a sense of fulfilment more widely reflects the dynamic of global cities across the world. Lagos here embodies an in-between meeting-point, a physical place to which Aubrey and Ida travel as they attempt to overcome their feelings of unbelonging. However, their subsequent move to London demonstrates cities’ incapacity to foster a sense of home for those who struggle to belong elsewhere.

Discontented with their marriage, Ida and Aubrey rarely engage with one another and retreat further into themselves: ‘Ida had not looked at him closely in a long time, and it was a disturbing sensation, their children present around them, that she did not in her heart feel a faint recognition of desire’.⁴²³ Their meeting in Lagos and later life in London together indicate that urban environments can both cultivate and intensify an in-between mentality. Despite living in one of the world’s most vivacious cities, Ida and Aubrey live a suspended existence, inhabiting a quasi-life. The dynamic flux of the city – Lagos and London – at different stages of their lives, provides Aubrey and Ida with a hybrid space of possibility where they belong and indeed, don’t belong, together. When the novel is set, later in their lives, the dynamism of London exacerbates their sense of being apart and not at home in each other’s company, house or city. In this sense, the tangle of belonging and un-belonging in their lives is intricate and their meeting ‘somewhere in the middle’

⁴²² *Ibid*, p.31

⁴²³ *Ibid*, p.22

resonates with the image of a cycle which is never fully completed. The lack of closure in the trajectory of their lives is inherited by the younger generations of the Hunter family.

An in-between-ness reverberates through the lives of the members of the Hunter family and as Evans notes, "Their [the twins] parents are avoiding the reality of their lives, they are not communicating with each other and their marriage is not a happy partnership. All their daughters have inherited this avoidance".⁴²⁴ I would argue that this tendency to avoid addressing, as Evans describes it, 'the unhappiness in some people's lives', reflects her claim to her work being read as reflecting universal human experience. The un-happiness in Ida and Aubrey's lives manifests itself through a form of being ensnared between two worlds and can be translated as a form of liminal in-between-ness.⁴²⁵ Ida, Aubrey, Bessi, and Georgia permanently occupy an in-between space which challenges the traditional rootedness associated with home, presenting an alternative sense of belonging that is psychologically and emotionally driven. In her study on constructions of belonging in black British literature, Helen Cousins argues that the mixed-race heritage of Bessi and Georgia hinders their ability to form a stable sense of belonging: 'As mixed-race individuals, in the physical environment, they appear inevitably to occupy an 'in-between' or a 'hybrid' space where home is never achievable'.⁴²⁶ While I agree with Cousins' assertion that the 'protagonists develop alternative conceptions of home', I do not consider that they feel compelled to do so on the basis of their racial identity. Instead, through the loft at 26 Waifer Avenue (a haven away from the in-between-ness represented by London), and its close affiliation with the concept of twoness in oneness, the twins establish a strong sense of home. Their sense of home shrinks down to the very intimate, small spaces of the attic room they share, where they are physically and psychologically in familiar and comforting terrain.

⁴²⁴ Evans quoted in Evaristo, p.33

⁴²⁵ *Ibid*, p.34

⁴²⁶ Helen Cousins, 'Returns 'Home': Constructing Belonging in Black British Literature: Evans, Evaristo & Oyeyemi', *African Literature Today*, 34 (2016) [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt1gpcf5n.14>], p.186

On hearing the news of the move to Sekon, the twins immediately feel anxious about the impending departure from their city and home. Evans illustrates the extent to which Bessi and Georgia are perturbed by the idea of lodgers occupying the loft through imagery conjuring invasion and violation: 'The thought of strangers sleeping in 26a and treating it like home was like imagining someone moving into your stomach, into your head, into your dreams'.⁴²⁷ This envisioning of strangers entering the loft disturbingly evokes images of bodily penetration with the twins' psychological constructions of belonging being mapped in overtly physical terms. Evans represents the twins most extreme sense of anxiety in terms of bodily spatial metaphors – the 'strangers' occupation of the loft morphing into an occupation of one's embodied self.

The image of the lodgers gaining access to intimate physical and psychological realms reveal Bessi and Georgia's hyper-microcosmic relationship to the space around them. The twins construct a form of geographic hierarchy to reflect the progressive shrinking of macrocosmic London into smaller, more personal locations: London is filtered through Neasden, which is home to 26 Waifer Avenue, in which the loft is situated. Their insatiable desire to protect the loft here presents the space as womb-like. There is a great deal of scholarship on the association of women with madness, in which the attic space becomes a site in which supposed madness is performed.⁴²⁸ The maternal urge to guard the sacred loft echoes the portrayal of the 'Madwoman in the Attic', reinforcing the historic representations of the attic as a space of female hysteria and frenzy as discussed in the introduction to this chapter.

The chaos that arises in the twins' minds as a result of their imminent separation from the loft emphasises its intimate connection to the twins' identity: 'The whole thing was getting out of control. [...] They'd grow old and be foreign'.⁴²⁹ News of the move disorients their grounding in their family home, provoking them to feel apprehensive about the loss of familial ties they associate exclusively with the house. In a conversation between Ida and her daughters, Bessi's exoticisation of Nigeria,

⁴²⁷ Evans, *26a*, p.44

⁴²⁸ See Gilbert and Gubar

⁴²⁹ Evans, *26a*, p.41

their mother's native home, as 'foreign', corroborates the twins' strong attachment to Neasden. The twins alignment of Neasden with perceptions of selfhood speaks to subliminal fears of becoming more Nigerian and subsequently less British and not feeling 'at home' in London: "Will we be Nigerians?" Bessi asked her mother [...] She paused to answer Bessi's question: 'What do you mean? You are Nigerian now,' she said'.⁴³⁰ As well as revealing the disparity between Ida's perception of her daughters' relationship to their Nigerian parentage and her daughters' own interpretation of cultural belonging, the interchange points to Bessi's and Georgia's interpretation of their heritage. As Reive Holland remarks, 'Although, and perhaps because, they are recognizably of African descent, Georgia and Bessi worry that their cultural self, their European-ness, will be lost in Sekon'.⁴³¹ Reive Holland highlights the twins' endeavours to retain a duality that focuses on a doubling, rather than dividing, proceeding to argue that the twins' 'subjecthood', their 'mixed-race subjectivity [...] becomes a site of potential reconstellation, rather than split [...] twinhood helps the children – they are doubled, rather than split'.⁴³² This analogy assists in understanding the twins' faith in the resilience of twoness in oneness, the doubleness attached to the twins' 'subjecthood' which conveys the versatility of their bond in its ability to function across cultural and national borders.

The novel's representation of the twins' experiences in Nigeria subverts and complicates the ideal of a return to the motherland. Evans firmly refuses the clichéd idea of 'mother Africa' embracing the Hunter children, offering a complex rendering of belonging and un-belonging in this context. During a visit to see their maternal grandparents in their mother's childhood town of Aruwa, their grandfather recounts a Yoruban folk-tale about twins that taints and derails the childhood innocence attached to twoness in oneness. Their grandfather alludes to the idea of twins as bad omens in Yoruban culture, explaining that the birth of twins, Onia and Ode, evoked fear and anxiety in communities and, as was custom, the second born, Ode, was killed: 'Shortly after Ode's death, Onia became sick and it was only when her twin's ghost entered her body that she recovered'.⁴³³ The implications of this

⁴³⁰ *Ibid*, p.44

⁴³¹ Reive Holland, p.561

⁴³² *Ibid*, p.561

⁴³³ Evans, 26a, p.63

story for Bessi and Georgia resonate throughout the rest of the novel. For them, Onia and Ode's story functions not merely as a fantastical ghost story but, rather, as a sinister reassertion of their twoness in oneness and understanding of home. The telling of the story serves a foreshadowing function. While the idea of losing one another is unfathomable to Bessi and Georgia, Ode's ability to secure life after death in Onia's body proves the profound strength of the belonging found in twoness in oneness.

Despite missing home comforts associated with the Neasden loft, the twins' twoness in oneness acts as a mobile home, and they are comforted by familial routines and dynamics in a new geographic space: 'home had a way of shifting, of changing shape and temperature. Home was homeless. It could exist anywhere, because its only substance was familiarity'.⁴³⁴ This quotation, cited in the epigraph above, serves to emphasise the ways in which the twins' sense of belonging is engrained in the idea of twoness in oneness, enabling them to construct a home away from the physical comforts they associate with 26a. In spite of transporting their physical home to another continent, the twins' sense of belonging remains rooted in each other – the 'familiarity' of one another provides reassurance and a sense of security. The physical implications of moving home, changes to 'shape and temperature', appear trivial in comparison to the rootedness of twoness in oneness which endures across different environments and locations.

As Bessi and Georgia begin to feel settled in Sekon, a distressing event disturbs and challenges their unity. One night, while the older members of the Hunter family are hosting a party, Georgia wanders into the garden of the compound in which they live, a place she finds beautiful and soothing: 'Of all the places in the world, apart from the loft and next to Bessi, Georgia felt most at home in a garden'.⁴³⁵ Tranquillity and order are obliterated however when Sedrick, the compound's watchman, sexually assaults Georgia: 'Sedrick put his hand over Georgia's mouth. It took a lot of co-ordination. To hold the legs in cartwheel, to cover the mouth, to undo his belt. She

⁴³⁴ *Ibid*, p.54

⁴³⁵ *Ibid*, p.66

was wriggling in all directions'.⁴³⁶ Even in a moment of individual suffering and trauma, Georgia's first thought is of Bessi as she telepathically fears that both she and her sister are dying: 'Was Bessi dying? They had decided that they would die together. Was it now?'⁴³⁷ Georgia recalls the distressing nightmare that she associates with the twins' births with repeated imagery of being caught on a road with oncoming traffic from the early pages of the novel creating an apocalyptic atmosphere: 'Yes, this is definitely it, thought Georgia. A wild thought. She saw the headlights. She heard the engine. Oh Bessi, be there when I get there, be there when I get there'.⁴³⁸ The image of Georgia as helpless prey, threatened and fearful of a pending attack, emerges as a motif to emphasise her inclination to retreat into herself. Georgia aligns herself with both the vulnerable animal caught in the headlights and the prey hiding from the beast during her visit to Leicester Square.

The psychological and emotional repercussions of the rape result in her withdrawing into herself and her connectedness to Bessi becoming incomplete. In an attempt to protect the sacredness of home, family, and her relationship with Bessie, Georgia decides not to report the violent act, a decision which appears to be motivated by a selfless desire to protect her sister and her ignorance of such evil. Georgia immediately notes the detrimental implications that not confiding in Bessi has upon their twinness: 'Georgia tried to think about how she could put [...] Sedrick's hands and Sedrick's belt opening into words that were sayable. It was the first time ever, in this land of twoness in oneness, that something had seemed unsayable'.⁴³⁹ The tragic undertones of Georgia's incapacity to articulate the words to recount the event to Bessi is intensified by the syntax and grammar of the description of the rape. Lacking breaks or commas, the streaming narrative voice echoes the breathlessness and shock of the rape itself. Aside from appearing incongruous in this violent context, the innocence underpinning the 'cartwheels' and 'grassfeet' that Georgia associates with the garden function as reminders of the sense of belonging that nature brings to Georgia until this point.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁶ *Ibid*

⁴³⁷ *Ibid*

⁴³⁸ *Ibid*, p.68

⁴³⁹ *Ibid*, p.69

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid*

The novel here again challenges pre-conceptions of the city by situating this act of violence in a rural setting; the urban environments of Lagos or London, more often associated with the threat of violence or rape, feel detached from this quiet rural scene. Georgia's closeness to nature carries a healing quality; it is only when surrounded by the comfort of nature that she appears to be content with being alone and without Bessi: 'There were low lights and voices coming from the house. But Georgia felt that she was very much alone in the garden. It was just her and the warmth in her palm.'⁴⁴¹ In contrast to the commotion and chaos evoked in the extract analysed earlier in which Georgia feels compelled to withdraw and hide underneath the funfair gimmick, the serenity of the garden lulls Georgia into a false sense of security. Amongst the sheer numbers of people and volume of traffic in Leicester Square, Georgia feels more alone and vulnerable than she does in this isolated garden setting. The calmness felt by Georgia, epitomised by the stillness and 'warmth' in her palm conflicts with the violence of Sedrick's attack. Evans challenges the familiar association of the rural with tranquillity to toy with the dichotomy between urban and rural environments, overturning the anxiety engendered by Georgia's visit to Leicester Square to a 'safe' environment such as the garden.

Georgia's rape initiates her depression and detachment as well as the twins' subsequent trajectory into singularity. The trauma of sexual assault creates fissures in the in-between-ness that underpins Georgia's narrative and provokes a further retreat into an otherworldly realm in which she is able to detach from the emotional difficulties of coming to terms with what happened to her. Reive Holland notes Evans' subversive representation of a comforting 'return home' to Nigeria: '[...] it is the journey "home" to Nigeria which precipitates both Ida's and Georgia's mental declines. For each of these troubled characters, home is, in fact, hostile, and not the place of refuge that marks much migrant and diasporic writing'.⁴⁴² The aftermath of the Hunter family's journey to Nigeria demonstrates the impact that their time there has upon both Georgia and Ida's mental health. On returning to London, Bessi decides to pursue a work opportunity in the Caribbean, leaving Georgia in the loft

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.66

⁴⁴² Reive Holland, p.565

on her own. While Bessie feels that 'It will be good for us . . . it's time, to find out who we are when we're on our own', Georgia feels increasingly unstable and vulnerable without Bessi by her side.⁴⁴³ As Evans notes:

Whereas most people come into the world after nine months of virtual solitude, for twins the concept of solitude, and all that goes with it—independence, individuality, self-sufficiency—is an alien one. Solitude becomes something that you fear.⁴⁴⁴

The sexual assault in Sekon, compounded by a separation from Bessi, drastically unsettles and disturbs Georgia's construction of home. As Evans' comments exemplify, the idea of being alone for Georgia is anxiety-inducing and provokes a retreat into her own mind.

Home as Homeless: Dreams

Both Georgia and her mother Ida construct imaginative refuges in their dreams as a means of escaping the challenges posed by everyday life. Ida appears to exist within in-between realms, vacillating between the real world and an imaginative one that she conjures in her mind. Aruwa functions similarly for her as does the loft for Bessi and Georgia. Nostalgia and mysticism are intertwined with Ida's construction of the place:

Like Georgia, Ida gave the impression—the quietness, the sideways look—of someone who was always leaving and had never fully arrived, only hers was a different place altogether. It was on the map in the hallway, with Italy, in yellow, and British Airways could get her there. Nigeria and Ida, parted now for sixteen years . . . There was red dust still in her eyes.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴³ Evans, *26a*, p.133

⁴⁴⁴ Evans, 'My Other Half', *The Observer*, February 6 2005
[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/feb/06/fiction.features1>]

⁴⁴⁵ Evans, *26a*, p.18

Ida's narrative is peppered with intermittent interjections by her mother Nne-Nne, who repeatedly appears in her everyday Neasden life: 'Ida stood at the door, while Nne-Nne whispered'.⁴⁴⁶ Ida's seeking spiritual support from Nne-Nne signifies the need for Nigerian rituals as part of her British existence, emphasising the dichotomy between the belonging fashioned in her mind and the lack of belonging in everyday life. Nne-Nne's established role in Ida's London life on the one hand indicates that this English urban setting has become home for Ida to the extent that her mother, an integral part of domestic life, has become part of it—albeit through an imaginative leap. On the other hand, Ida's clear urge to call upon her mother for guidance and support also suggests that she is unanchored in Neasden. Ida's dialogues with her mother represent an imaginative return home, a yearning for the comfort of her authentic home, personified by the matriarchal figure.

A sense of un-belonging in the world of the here and now is intrinsic to both mother and daughter, and Georgia embodies a permanent state of in-between-ness. While repeatedly emphasising Bessi and Georgia's twinness as located internally, the novel nevertheless clearly distinguishes from the outset the sisters' different psychological states: 'The real differences, the ones that mattered most, were inside, under clothes and in the soul. There was light and there was shade'.⁴⁴⁷ Georgia exists most comfortably in the 'shade', a liminal world, moving outside her physical body into spiritual and imagined worlds. In her dreams, Georgia finds solace and reassurance in imaginative homes through regular visits to Gladstone Park, the home of William Gladstone, the late nineteenth-century British Prime Minister. Gladstone Park, embellished with 'lines of oaks' and 'reams of gleaming green grass' epitomises a traditional English country estate within the realm of nature that Georgia finds comforting.⁴⁴⁸ Gladstone emerges as an imaginative friend and a mentor to Georgia, upheld as an 'extremely important' figure that anchors her in London.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.166

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.43

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p.67

Georgia's deteriorating mental health is traced through the infrequency of her imaginative visits to Gladstone Park. After the rape takes place in the gardens at Sekon she is unable to conceptualise nature in a way in which provides comfort and security. Her incapacity to secure a form of escapism through her dreams acts as one of the catalysts in the decline of her mental health. As the reassuring images of Gladstone Park subside, her dreams become filled with darker visions. When Gladstone does revisit Georgia in the later stages of the novel, his aged appearance echoes the degeneration of Georgia's health: 'Gladstone walked in wearing his dressing gown. He was bald now. He moved towards her through the lights and the witches and disappeared into her'.⁴⁴⁹ The breakdown of the imaginative relationship is emblematic of Georgia's later struggle to forge any sense of belonging. As Georgia's dreams become increasingly dominated by dark and sinister imagery, she struggles to maintain the equilibrium represented by in-between-ness and increasingly succumbs to overwhelming feelings of estrangement in the city in which she was born and raised.

The presentation of Georgia's mental illness in the novel, as Reive Holland suggests, supports Evans reorienting of black British narratives and presents 'protagonists who struggle with mental illness not solely precipitated by feelings of racialised alienation'.⁴⁵⁰ It is in fact Georgia's separation from Bessi, the compromises to their twoness in oneness, that catalyses her mental instability. Georgia's fragmentation is traced through her failure to build a strong internal sense of belonging which is independent from the notion of twoness in oneness. As Scafe articulates, Georgia's fragility [...] echoes her mother's: both characters are out of place'.⁴⁵¹ Scafe's analysis of Evans' depiction of the homelessness inherent to the Hunter family's construction of home draws attention to 'spaces of homelessness' as 'both enabling and unsettling'.⁴⁵² If we read the subconscious as a homeless space and adopt Georgia's imaginative exchanges with Gladstone as an example of the ways in which 'spaces of homelessness' are simultaneously liberating and disturbing, we can trace

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.100 and p.170

⁴⁵⁰ Reive Holland, p.556

⁴⁵¹ Scafe, 'Unsettling the Centre: Black British Fiction', p. 219

⁴⁵² *Ibid*, p.222

the state of her mental health. While Georgia's early visits to Gladstone Park show her proactively seeking refuge in a happy, positive place in her own mind, her later visits to a ghostly, dark and deteriorating psychological place encompass her increasingly depressed outlook on the world. Evans posits Georgia's mind as a both a powerful and precarious place in Georgia's conceiving of home.

The Loft as a Symbolic Space of Refuge

The loft emerges as a compelling physical and symbolic home for the twins, embodying the most microcosmic definition of home within the novel, a haven away from the challenges of everyday urban life. The twins' conceptualisation of home is interlocked with the loft, which acts as a physical manifestation of their twoness in oneness and models a subject's ability to forge a construction of home that is imaginative and intangible but nevertheless remains grounded through a physical space. Bessi and Georgia continuously deploy twoness in oneness to imply a selfhood that is split and shared, a double-ness that contrasts with singularity, overcoming the in-between-ness that underpins the Hunter family members' experiences. As Cousin observes, home for Bessi and Georgia is each other: 'For Georgia in particular, it is that twoness in oneness that creates home; her only 'place to go' is Bessi'.⁴⁵³ As Georgia increasingly struggles to cope with everyday life and plunges into depression, her idealisation of Bessi and the loft deepens. Georgia envisions her relationship with Bessi as a tangible location, a place 'where bad things never happen'.⁴⁵⁴ After the attack in the garden in Sekon, Georgia appears to be unable to function without Bessi and suffers from spells of anxiety concerning her sister's safety and wellbeing: 'I get worry attacks every so often and think, oh my god, Bessi (oh oh oh) oh dear, I hope she's all right, oh dear!'⁴⁵⁵ The loft and its symbolisation of twoness in oneness fosters a peace and tranquillity that Georgia is unable to find elsewhere in London. Yet, as the twins' lives change and evolve, Georgia's determination to retain and prolong the twoness in oneness embedded in

⁴⁵³ Cousins, p.190

⁴⁵⁴ Evans, *26a*, p.101

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.138

the loft paradoxically compounds her feelings of un-belonging, exacerbating her retreat into the 'timeless dark'.⁴⁵⁶

The twins mark the attic space at the top of the house as their territory by engraving their initials 'G + B' on the door⁴⁵⁷. McLeod comments on the 'positive possibilities' of the '+' sign in relation to a forging of a 'Great Britishness' that 'takes us beyond the hyphenated, awkwardness and supplemental, subtracting negativity of adjectives such as 'Black-British.'"⁴⁵⁸ This reading of the 'G + B' engraving captures the novel's shift to a 'post-racial way of thinking' that is physically inscribed into the location at the heart of the novel. An alternative interpretation of the 'G + B' emphasises the double-ness that is inherent to Georgie and Bessi's construction of self: 'its mathematical reference', as McLeod notes, to the 'sum of two people.'⁴⁵⁹ Preferring to use a plus sign over a conjunctive 'and' or ampersand, the twins perceive the combined Georgia and Bessi as a whole. The unit produced from the addition of 'G + B' represents the loft's role in curating Bessi and Georgia's twinness. Within 26a, the harmonious balance of the conjoined 'G + B' is maintained: 'the loft was their house, it was full of secrets and thresholds. It belonged to them'.⁴⁶⁰ The deployment of the word 'threshold' here denotes the atmosphere of otherworldliness that surrounds the loft, a border between one world and another. The loft represents an 'extra-dimension', a shelter away from the outside city that could potentially threaten or complicate the twins' grounded belonging in twoness in oneness.⁴⁶¹

The compelling depiction of this form of double-ness in the novel derives at least in part from the autobiographical details entrenched in the text. The novel's dedication to Evan's twin sister Paula, who committed suicide at the age of 24, permeates the novel.⁴⁶² She has openly acknowledged that the novel reflects an effort to 'make a monument to her [Paula], to do something big to acknowledge what has

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.101 and p.173

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p.5

⁴⁵⁸ McLeod, p.48

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid*

⁴⁶⁰ Evans, 26a, p.44

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.5

⁴⁶² See 'Zoe Paxton interviews Diana Evans: Death of a Twin'

happened'.⁴⁶³ Evans equates home with being a twin: 'From very early on, we had relied on each other as a reference point for who we were'.⁴⁶⁴ Similarly to Bessi and Georgia, Evans recognises twins' collective sense of 'we' in constructions of self. Her own experiences of living as a twin in London are mediated in the character of Bessi, as she makes clear when pointing to intimate and devastating parallels between her own and Bessi's experiences—namely the loss of a twin:

In the journal I was keeping at the time of Paula's death there is a blank space of three or four pages. Those blank pages say everything about what it is to suddenly discover that your twin is no longer alive [...] I could not imagine life without her and I could not imagine myself without her. It seemed, virtually, as if I had also ceased to exist.⁴⁶⁵

The ceasing of twoness in oneness had devastating emotional consequences for Evans' conception of belonging in a world in which she was no longer a twin: 'Despite all the warning signs, the news of her death was still the greatest shock imaginable; shocking in its finality, its cruelty, its matter-of-factness, and its disparity with how I had witnessed the world until that point'.⁴⁶⁶ Evans' own tragedy inevitably informs the depiction of Georgia's suicide later in the novel. The complications attached to the use of the autobiographical in fiction, explored in the introduction to this thesis, manifest themselves in Evans' representation of Georgia's suicide. Georgia's death is closely aligned with a personal event that Evans has publicly made statements about and in the compelling prose in which Evans writes Georgia's suicide and Bessi's subsequent grief, the description of her own grief seems to merge with that of her fictional construct. There are moments where the author's sense of empathy for her characters merges into one voice; the sisterly guilt expressed by Bessi carries a personal and intimate quality: 'I should have stayed with you the nights, all the awful nights, I should have looked after you'.⁴⁶⁷ In another context, the magic realism of Georgia's ghostly move into Bessi's body would appear far-fetched and obscure however Evans succeeds in presenting the

⁴⁶³ Evans quoted in Evaristo, p.33

⁴⁶⁴ Evans, 'My Other Half'

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid*

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid*

⁴⁶⁷ Evans, *26a*, p.211

twins' union after death in a manner in which emphasises the strength and longevity of sisterly bonds.

Evans' narrative style persuades the reader that Georgia re-homes herself in Bessi's body after death. After the suicide, Evans continues to endorse in-between-ness as a state of being as Georgia haunts Bessi's body in a manner that resonates uncannily with her childhood experience of dressing-up as a 'ghost' at Halloween.⁴⁶⁸ The moment that she enters Bessi's body functions as the culmination of twoness in oneness, echoing the narrative of Onia and Ode that their grandfather shared with them during their time in Nigeria:

Bessi feels something new in her neck and at the top of her head and in the veins throughout her body. I shake myself loose throughout her . . . I have moved fully into her legs her arms her feet, into her eyes and I am almost comfortable now. I almost fit [...] I move, finally, into her heart, and I tell her yes.⁴⁶⁹

Evans' deploys literary devices from magic realism to render Georgia finding 'a way to fit her [Bessi]' in a credible way.⁴⁷⁰ The antithetical depiction of light and dark of the surroundings in the scene in which Georgia enters Bessi's body serves to highlight the 'shadows' and ghostly realm which Georgia is occupying. The symbolic significance of nature in Georgia's trajectory is played out in her haunting of Bessi's body. The motif of flowers resituates a sense of life after death as the 'two large lilies', flowers traditionally associated with death, which Georgia buys on the morning of her suicide are substituted by the image of a 'vase of daffodils on the windowsill', Spring flowers traditionally attached to notions of life and re-birth, once the twins' are spiritually reunited.⁴⁷¹

The presentation of Georgia's reclaiming of twoness in oneness in death signifies the novel's suggestion that home can be found in a world beyond the here and now. In the act of entering Bessi's body, Georgia echoes her earlier sentiment: 'She'll always

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p.125

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p.210

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p.210

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.187 and p.212

be there. She's the best bit of me. We're half-each'.⁴⁷² In her work on representations of what she terms 'half and half' children in novels by third-generation Nigerian women novelists, Jane Bryce indicates that the 'ghostly twin' in the novel 'powerfully embodies the *haunting* of the diasporic Nigerian'.⁴⁷³ Bryce's analysis of Georgia's life after death as a manifestation of the 'haunting of the diasporic Nigerian' assumes a reading of Nigeria as Bessi and Georgia's motherland. Bryce implies that Georgia's 'haunting' denotes a 'real dissatisfaction with the condition of migrancy'.⁴⁷⁴ This diagnosis seems to me to be more pertinent to Ida, than it does to either Bessi or Georgia. As previously argued, I would contend assessing Georgia and Bessi as diasporic beings on the basis of their strong grounding in Neasden. I interpret Georgia's visits to Bessi after death less as a haunting and more as a reunion, a spiritual reconciliation of twoness in oneness beyond traditional human boundaries of life and death. Nevertheless, while Bessi and Georgia do not appear to feel any displacement from Nigeria, events that occur during their time in Nigeria—especially the rape of Georgia and their grandfather's telling of the story of Onia and Ode—subsequently haunt the twins' trajectories. The rape triggers a depression to which Georgia ultimately succumbs by taking her own life. Reading Georgia's character as a representation of the 'ghostly twin' provides insight into the act of entering Bessi's body as the climax of Georgia's liminal existence, embodying the notion of twoness in oneness more tangibly and perfectly than she was capable of doing in life. Such an interpretation aligns with Cousins' notion that 'Georgia uses the power of twins, as illustrated by the story of Onia and Ode, to re-home herself'.⁴⁷⁵ The final line of the novel encapsulates Georgia's reconciled sense of belonging in life after death. On departing Bessi's body, Georgia reassures her sister of the endurance of the twins' twoness in oneness: 'I'll meet you by the evergreen tree, said Georgia'.⁴⁷⁶ The evergreen tree that embodied the only substitute for the comfort Georgia attached to Bessi during her absences from Waifer Avenue emerges as a monument for Bessi to visit and spiritually communicate with her twin. In death, Georgia is able to channel a secure and durable sense of belonging through her faith

⁴⁷² *Ibid*, p.101

⁴⁷³ Bryce, p.64

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid*

⁴⁷⁵ Bryce, p.192

⁴⁷⁶ Evans, 26a, p.230

in nature and bond with Bessi. Bessi and Georgia's belief in twoness in oneness possesses the power to reconcile the alternates, dualities, and frictions that underpin in-between-ness to embody the co-existence of belonging and un-belonging as a state of being.

Urban 'in-between-ness'

Through the depiction of the experiences of a mixed-race family living in northwest London, *26a* succeeds in derailing expectations of narratives of belonging and un-belonging in the contemporary British novel. The text offers a portrayal of Bessi and Georgia's search for belonging that grants voice and psychological complexity to British black women characters who are too often subjected to critical expectations to adopt the role of spokesperson for both their race and gender. The words of Zora Neale Hurston, articulated in her essay, 'How It Feels to Be Coloured Me' echo throughout Evans' novel and strike resonance with the twins' outlook on the world: 'At certain times I have no race, I am me. [...] I belong to no race nor no time'.⁴⁷⁷ Hurston's focus on 'me', her strong sense of 'self' shifts the focus of race as a social or cultural signifier: 'Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me'.⁴⁷⁸ In her refusal to conform to societal expectations, Hurston's comments encapsulate the novel's move away from themes that derive from racialised readings of black British literature to expose the everyday challenges faced by Londoners in forging a strong and stable sense of belonging in a multifaceted urban environment.

26a's interpretation of belonging and un-belonging in London remains an ambivalent one: home is both stable and insecure, comforting and problematic. The novel appears to simultaneously champion and criticise a perpetual state of in-between-ness that renders 'home' as 'homeless'. Aubrey, Ida, Bessi, and, most

⁴⁷⁷ Zora Neale Hurston, 'How It Feels to Be Coloured Me', *The World Tomorrow*, (1928)[http://www.cengage.com/custom/static_content/OLC/s76656_76218lf/hurston.pdf]

p. 3

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid*

notably, Georgia's difficulty in negotiating 'feeling at home' implies that a strong current of unbelonging is inherent to contemporary life. The novel's representation of the Hunter family indicates that, despite gaining comfort in the familiar, engendered by the family unit, subjects struggle to retain a consistent and stable sense of belonging.

The novel's representation of London is similarly riddled with intricacies and contradictions. Georgia's suicide is a devastating consequence of complicated origins, including the traumatic rape in Sekon, displacement from 26a and overlooked psychological vulnerabilities and yet, from the early pages of the novel Evans highlights the unease and anxiety provoked in Georgia by a typical London scene. At the same time, the novel demonstrates that urban environments foster an acceptance of in-between-ness in the sense of welcoming individuals who are struggling to determine their place in the world. Ida and Aubrey's trajectories, despite seeming unfulfilled, normalise the ways in which urban environments foster a permanent state of in-between-ness. Urban in-between-ness, according to the novel, is not a product of a person's racialised, gendered, or cultural hybridity but, rather, originates from the trans-historical human challenge of understanding how to belong.

The novel's indication that life in the capital is inevitably conditioned by a sense of un-belonging, of never quite being able to acquire a sense of belonging, is a bleak one, but points to an insightful analysis of contemporary London culture. The text proposes a state of in-between-ness as both a strategy for survival in the modern metropolis and equally a means of accepting the un-obtainability of a consistent state of belonging. This space between belonging and un-belonging emerges as arguably the most compelling construction of home in *26a*.

In Evans' rendering the twins make a home in the city which begins with their twoness in oneness, which is nested in the loft and in turn, the house in Waifer Avenue, located in Neasden. This hierarchy of belonging assists the twins' rationalisation of home from microcosmic to macrocosmic locations, framed by a combative engagement with the 'big city' of London and the 'foreign' city of Lagos.

As Reive Holland observes, this form of twenty-first century cosmopolitanism 'allows for a cross-temporal and multi-locational sense of belonging to emerge'.⁴⁷⁹ The novel forges a new model of belonging which acknowledges that in an increasingly globalised world, definitions of belonging derive from a multitude of places, cultures and traditions. It is such notions of belonging, which are neither defined nor limited by attachment to a single physical location, that I wish to explore in Evaristo's work in the next section.

⁴⁷⁹ Reive Holland, p.558

Belonging and Un-belonging in Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*

*We'd try to imagine the world beyond
the city, that country a lifetime
away that Mum called home
and Dad called prison.*⁴⁸⁰

The Emperor's Babe participates in redefining notions of home in the contemporary city. Set in Roman Londinium in AD 211, the verse-novel presents an interplay between past and present to detangle and query hegemonic representations of London's history. The text's epigraph, taken from Oscar Wilde's *The Critic as an Artist*, establishes the premise of the novel: 'The only duty we owe to history is to rewrite it'.⁴⁸¹ Evaristo's choice of epigraph provides a lens through which to scrutinise official national trajectories and challenge readings of Britain as historically monocultural. Homi K. Bhabha's, *The Location of Culture*, assists in understanding Evaristo's awakening of readers to the multiplicity inherent in Britain's history. Commenting upon the amnesia of European history, what he defines as 'the time lag of postcolonial modernity', Bhabha's theory contextualises the ways in which *The Emperor's Babe* disrupts master narratives of British history to contribute to new definitions of modernity and its relationship to what has taken

⁴⁸⁰ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p. 12

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid*, p.i

place before.⁴⁸² In uncovering the historic racial plurality of Britain, the novel participates in a re-imagining of conceptions of home in the twenty-first century.

While *The Emperor's Babe* is composed in a manner that invites being described as 'meta-historical', it is based on careful archival work. As this thesis' introduction foregrounds, the text is a product of Evaristo's research at the Museum of London while poet-in-residence there and she has repeatedly emphasised that the text is not simply a 're-presentation' of London history, but rather a 'direct challenge to Britain's misguided sense of its own history and identity'.⁴⁸³ In what was to emerge as a 'historical phenomenon in its own right', Fryer's *Staying Power* traced the history of black people in Britain and, according to Paul Gilroy, 'established the basic orientation point for historical scholarship on Britain's black communities'.⁴⁸⁴ The opening lines of *Staying Power* revise any misconceptions over black British history, asserting that '[t]here were Africans in Britain before the English came here. They were soldiers in the Roman imperial army that occupied the southern part of our island for three and a half centuries'.⁴⁸⁵ Fryer's text inspired *The Emperor's Babe* - Evaristo thanks him in the acknowledgments section at the end of the novel for exposing her to the fact 'that Africans had lived in Britain during the Roman occupation nearly eighteen hundred years ago'.⁴⁸⁶ This research manifests itself in Evaristo's presentation of Londinium in important ways: firstly, like Fryer, she wishes to amend hegemonic images of British history to record the long presence of black people in Britain and 'disrupt the notion that Britain was only populated by white people until recently'.⁴⁸⁷ Secondly, in portraying Roman Londinium as a polycultural, polyethnic space in which the social and cultural indicators attached to racial identities are omitted, she aims to dissect the relationship between unbelonging and migrant subjectivity.

⁴⁸² Homi K. Bhabha, 'Race, Time and the Revision of Modernity' in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 241

⁴⁸³ Evaristo quoted in Michael Collins, "'My Preoccupations are in My DNA': An interview with Bernardine Evaristo, *Callaloo*, 31: 4 (2008) [<https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.0.0284>], p.1200

⁴⁸⁴ Paul Gilroy, 'Introduction' in Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, p. x

⁴⁸⁵ Fryer, 'Those kinde of people', p. 1

⁴⁸⁶ Evaristo, 'Acknowledgements' in *The Emperor's Babe*

⁴⁸⁷ Evaristo quoted in Collins, p.1200

An example of the novel's breaking-down of racial hierarchies is the characterisation of Libya-born Severus as the leader of the Roman empire: 'They spoke of the great Septimus Severus, / who has gone from African boy / to Roman emperor'.⁴⁸⁸ Evaristo purposefully destabilises the traditional black/white dyad to disrupt social signifiers attached to racial identities, fashioning an image of a city in which inhabitants who originate from elsewhere are fully integrated at all levels of society. The novel's protagonist, Zuleika, is the daughter of refugees from Sudan who give her hand in marriage to an older, wealthy Roman. In the early days of their marriage, Zuleika's husband, Felix, presents her with servants described as 'Two ginger girls [...] captured up north, the freckled sort (typical of Caledonians)'.⁴⁸⁹ Zuleika's role as slave-owner epitomises, as Collins asserts, that 'the condition of being a slave or of having a slave has no necessary relationship to race'.⁴⁹⁰ Ester Gendusa concurs, reinforcing that, within the novel, 'white and black people alike undergo forms of subordination due to hierarchical power structures underpinning the Roman society'.⁴⁹¹ Zuleika's attitude towards and treatment of the Scottish slaves re-enacts a cruel imperialist practice, demonstrating, as Evaristo articulates, that 'history tells us that the need to control and exploit others by those in power is an aspect of the human condition'⁴⁹²: 'Fascinating, so vile, yet something / just for me, id and ego. Pets. / I ordered Tranio to chain them / to the jasmine tree and went to bed'.⁴⁹³ Zuleika's apparent power over the servants, de-personifying them in her allusion to them as pets and ordering for them to be chained, uncomfortably conjures resonances of histories of slavery associated with the transatlantic slave trade. At the same time, Zuleika's focus on Valeria and Aemilia's 'freckled' faces and 'red curls' reinforces Evaristo's assertion that 'slavery is not, nor has it ever been, confined to race'.⁴⁹⁴

The alignment of Evaristo's representation of the structure of the Roman Empire with English colonialism is a historical inversion which asks readers to reassess

⁴⁸⁸ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.41

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.55

⁴⁹⁰ Evaristo quoted in Collins, p.1200

⁴⁹¹ Ester Gendusa, 'Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*: Re-narrating Roman Britannia, De-essentialising European History', *Synthesis*, 8 (2015), p.55

⁴⁹² Evaristo quoted in Collins, p.1200

⁴⁹³ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.55

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid*, pp.55-56 and Evaristo quoted in Collins, p.1200

their understanding of British discourses of national history. Yet, in the representation of Roman Londinium's slave infrastructure, *The Emperor's Babe* also exposes persisting patriarchal systems of power which continue to subject women to unbelonging in their own domestic home. Echoing both Smith's and Evans' sentiments concerning readers' preconceptions of black or mixed-race characterisation, Evaristo comments:

I find it fascinating that people who have not read the book assume Zuleika must be a slave, and I've even come across people who have read the book and think she is too. But she's not. She's a free Roman girl/woman who is imprisoned within her marriage.⁴⁹⁵

Accepting that the tropes and patterns of history have shaped gendered and racial subjectivity, this section of the chapter offers a reappraisal of attachments to London through an engagement with *The Emperor's Babe's* characterisation of Zuleika. My contention here is that Evaristo exhumes historical accounts of British history to re-orientate twenty-first century notions of belonging in London. Close analysis of Evaristo's verse-novel provides an opportunity to deconstruct myths of an indigenous white British population's entitlement to the city to encourage the emergence of a form of belonging which pays homage to the historical cosmopolitanism of the city.

Historical and Literary Excavations

It would be easy to read *The Emperor's Babe* as a 're-writing' of traditional constructions of belonging in London. As well as Evaristo's provocative use of form and language, the verse-novel's cultural and literary engagements insist upon mapping London in new ways. I wish to assess Evaristo's presentation of Roman Londinium as an historical and literary excavation to expose the city's transcultural roots. As the introduction makes clear, *The Emperor's Babe* is a product of academic historical research. As Katherine Burkitt suggests, it responds to 'the lack of work

⁴⁹⁵ Evaristo quoted in Collins, p.1200

on the history of multicultural Britain' by 'explicitly aligning twenty-first century London with imperial Rome in a way which makes direct comparison between the postcolonial heart of the British Empire and the centre of Roman power'.⁴⁹⁶ Evaristo's verse-novel is therefore not a 're-presentation' of history but an attempt to correct misconceived ideas of a monocultural London, tracing patterns of migration of people across cultural, physical and temporal locations to expose the multiplicity embedded in London's foundations.

As explored in the previous chapter, there is an activism engrained in Evaristo's literature which I fully endorse. Scafe notes that *The Emperor's Babe* displays 'Evaristo's determination to disrupt literary conventions and to confound critical response to her work'.⁴⁹⁷ Scafe's comments establish the artistic and political framework in which Evaristo operates, encapsulating the author's potential to undermine dominant modes of seeing and thinking: 'My project as a writer is to always push the boundaries, to venture into new, sometimes precarious territory. It's risky, but I can't help myself'.⁴⁹⁸ Evaristo is perhaps not taking as many risks as she thinks precisely because there is a long tradition of women writers challenging hegemonic representations. In this sense, *The Emperor's Babe* fashions a productive form of solidarity with other women writers who have destabilised homogenised white, male normativity.

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's gathering of research on the genre of *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing* provides a lens through which to understand 'how women writers use and reconfigure history in their work'.⁴⁹⁹ Their work conceives metahistorical fiction as a vehicle for revealing the ways in which the past is projected on to the present, identifying a pattern in women's writing which seeks to 'undermine the 'fixed' or 'truthful' nature of the historical narrative itself'.⁵⁰⁰ They note that:

⁴⁹⁶ Katharine Burkitt, 'Post-Epic National Identities in Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*' in *Literary Form as Postcolonial Critique: Epic Proportions* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2012), p.72

⁴⁹⁷ Scafe, 'Unsettling the Centre', p. 219

⁴⁹⁸ Evaristo, quoted in Collins, p.1202

⁴⁹⁹ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, 'Introduction' in *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.1

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p.3

Women writers' impulse to reassess not only their own position in history but also the nature of that history's right to represent the 'truth' has coincided with a wider cultural challenge to what constitutes 'History'. The growth in 'new histories' of women, gender, ethnicity and sexuality since the late 1960s, for example, has prompted a change in educational practice as well as public perception.⁵⁰¹

Heilmann and Llewellyn align new ways of reading history with the twentieth century's first wave of feminism, opening up a dialogue regarding the activism underlying this genre of literature. The 'growth in new histories', which Heilmann and Llewellyn refer to, foregrounds the important role that women writers play in exposing a history of 'women, gender, ethnicity and sexuality' that has always been in existence, but has not been told, in favour of a version of history which buttresses certain gendered, social and cultural hierarchies. This 'turn' in historical trends can therefore in fact be read as a 'return' to societal roots to ensure that history's legacy is both accurate and true.

Tied to a feminist agenda of rethinking the patriarchal, white norm, *The Emperor's Babe* borrows structural and stylistic characteristics from both classical and contemporary literary sources to appropriate them in Evaristo's dynamic and lively verse. The text gathers a range of historical and literary traditions, grounding itself at the nexus of history and fiction in a way that encourages readers to see conceptualisations of belonging in London afresh. As Gendusa notes, '[...] one of the strengths of Evaristo's novel resides in its ability to stretch the boundaries of the literary genre so as to create a robust thematic connection with political issues at stake in present-day Britain'.⁵⁰² Evaristo's dynamic hybrid form has attracted the attention of critics who have observed the novel's dismantling of literary and cultural traditions to forge a new language which reflects twenty-first century experiences of the city. Scafe's analysis of this creative use of form assists in understanding the verse-novel's tone:

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid*

⁵⁰² Gendusa, p.51

[...] her work consistently confronts and resists realistic conventions. Although the writing for which she is most well known is defined as fiction or novels, she has said that the form that most interests her is poetry. She is drawn to poetry's 'linguistic inventiveness, imagistic freedom and the craft of concision' as well as its rhythm and sound.⁵⁰³

The form of the novel fuses literary conventions of epic poetry with contemporary spoken word to interweave Roman Londinium with contemporary London.

Justine McConnell suggests that the form and genre of the novel reinforce the intersectional nature of a city like London: '*The Emperor's Babe* [...] constantly combines prominent motifs from varying traditions in startling and revealing juxtapositions, exemplifying the nature of a multicultural city such as Londinium or Rome'.⁵⁰⁴ Aside from the evident integration of Latin phrases throughout the text, which I assess later, the intertextuality of *The Emperor's Babe*, appropriating both stylistic and narrative traditions from epic poetry reinforces the intersection of the past with the present that shapes the text, rendering the genre of poetry more accessible and less elitist to modern-day readers. McConnell convincingly makes the case for the connections between Evaristo's epic verse-novel and Homer's *The Odyssey*, Virgil's *The Aeneid* and Derek Walcott's *Omeros* which 'merge antiquity with modernity'.⁵⁰⁵ I would argue that Evaristo adopts the tradition of epic-poetry as a backdrop for the novel, but purposefully sets out to defy the creative and poetic limitations posed by this structure and form. *The Emperor's Babe* owes more to the prose novel than it does to the epic-poem in terms of tone, scope and form. A comparative analysis of the structure of the verse-novel and Homer's *The Odyssey* assists in further understanding the ways in which *The Emperor's Babe* revives this ancient literary form.

The Emperor's Babe is divided into ten overarching chapters, each of which comprises shorter poems which narrate episodes in Zuleika's life. By comparison,

⁵⁰³ Evaristo quoted in Suzanne Scafe, 'Unsettling the Centre: Black British Fiction', p. 218

⁵⁰⁴ Justine McConnell, 'Crossing Borders: Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*', *Callaloo*, 39:1 (2016) [<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/617636/pdf>], p.105

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p.106

while Homer's work clearly belongs to an oral tradition, published translations of *The Odyssey* trace Odysseus' return to Ithaca according to twenty-four books, each presenting a particular place on his journey.⁵⁰⁶ There is a striking difference between the repetition and order represented by the formal structure of *The Odyssey*'s twenty-four books and the more eclectic form of Evaristo's verse-novel which presents poems of varied lengths and tones. The verse-novel therefore allows for more versatility in both tone and form than traditional epic-poetry allows. I am persuaded by Burkitt's work on the 'post-epic' form in which she argues that Evaristo adopts this genre 'as a device to demonstrate the restrictions of the perceived 'completed' genres, which can only present cliché and unchallenging conservative ideology'.⁵⁰⁷ Burkitt's hypothesis is exemplified by a comparative analysis of the use of literary devices adopted by Evaristo and Homer. One of the literary devices most commonly deployed in epic-poetry is epithet; *The Odyssey* repeatedly relies upon epithets such as 'rosy-fingered Dawn' to capture the magnificence of the aesthetic image of the sun rising early in the morning.⁵⁰⁸ By contrast, Evaristo's use of imagery provides the reader with a particular impression of the person or scene that she is describing. Zuleika's introduction of Felix's physical appearance foregrounds the reader's perception of his character:

I looked through a large crack in the door

(there *were* many) and saw an old man,
much taller than my small father,

who was so thin, that day his stoop resembling
a frozen bow. The man was much fatter

than Pops too, he was in a word: obesus.
His smooth olive-skinned face wore

the haughty expression of a true patrician [...]⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁶ See Homer, *The Odyssey*, (Rev.) Dominic Rieu (London: Penguin Classics, 2009)

⁵⁰⁷ Katherine Burkitt, 'Imperial Reflections: The Post-Colonial Verse-Novel as Post-Epic' in *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.168

⁵⁰⁸ Homer, p.74

⁵⁰⁹ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p17

Evaristo's detailed description establishes the dynamic between Zuleika's family and Felix in negotiating the transaction of her hand in marriage. The use of simile comparing Zuleika's father, Anlamani's stoop to a 'frozen bow' serves to emphasise the difference in stature and, in turn, status, between the two men. The frozen quality of the bow used to describe Anlamani's posture emphasises Felix's power to intimidate him and, in this Greco-Roman context, evokes images of Medusa transmuting her victims to stone. The fact that Felix is described as 'obesus' signals his more indulgent lifestyle, again highlighting the differing economic circumstances of the men. The personification of Felix's seeming 'smooth', attractive, 'olive-skinned' face as 'haughty' emphasises Zuleika's husband-to-be's arrogance, further accentuating the social chasm between him and her family. Written from Zuleika's perspective as she peeps through a small opening in the door to observe the scene, the description of Felix's appearance highlights the clear age difference between him and his eleven year old future wife. As the above analysis makes clear, there is a textual and linguistic richness to Evaristo's verse-novel which the tradition of epic poetry lacks. The genre of Evaristo's verse novel permits far more expressive freedom than the formal structure of the traditional epic-poem and, as a result, a more compelling and original read.

The form and genre of the novel equally plays a crucial role in forging connections between Roman Londinium and the twenty-first century city. Evaristo's lively treatment of epic-style poetry, combined with idiosyncratic non-rhyming couplets and a contemporary use of language, serve to reinforce the multiplicities embedded in London culture. A comical example of this intertextual playfulness is Zuleika's attitude towards her tutor's insistence that she read Homer's *Iliad*: 'He made me read Homer's *Iliad*, / which I found bloody tedious, quite frankly. / All about the siege of Troy. I mean, who cares?'⁵¹⁰ The excerpt reflects a moment in the text in which antiquity and modernity are brought into dialogue, the formality and veneration attached to this ancient composition contrasting with Zuleika's indifference. The flippancy of Zuleika's attitude to Homer's ground-breaking work is reminiscent of a teenage attitude of dismissiveness, the cockney tone of words

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.83

such as 'bloody' that she deploys to express her feelings further accentuating the cultural distance between Homer's representation of Ancient Greek society and her own Roman life. Zuleika's opinions on the more 'contemporary / 'cos it's oh, only over two hundred years old' work by Virgil are equally condemning: 'You should hear him go on about Virgil, / *noster maximus poeta*, about how / the *Aeneid* will still be a classic text / in two millennia from now'.⁵¹¹ Here, Evaristo parodies the meta-historical genre in representing Zuleika's cynicism over the endurance of classical works such as *The Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, but also queries the canonical longevity of these ancient poems. Zuleika appears to ventriloquise Evaristo's attitude towards the disproportionate representation of the canonical epic in educational and cultural contexts. Zuleika notes that 'all the notable poets were men, except / for some butch dyke who lived with a bunch of lipstick lesbians on an island in Greece, / but she was really a minor poet [...]'.⁵¹² As a student of literature, Zuleika has inherited an understanding of the cultural connotations attached to the texts that we are encouraged to read and study, stating that the poets of notability were men. Her secondary reference to the lyrical woman poet, Sappho, from the island of Lesbos, Greece points to a patriarchal culture of learning in which male writers such as Homer and Virgil are heralded as literary icons and women writers of the same genre are ostracised. The intricate intertextuality of *The Emperor's Babe* complements the cultural and historical digging that the novel undertakes. The literary excavation which the novel pursues is reinforced by uncovering the countless layers of cultural influences which have contributed to, but have often been overlooked by hegemonic readings of London. I entirely agree with McConnell's assertion that the text 'combines prominent motifs from varying traditions in startling and revealing juxtapositions, exemplifying the nature of a multicultural city such as Londinium or Rome'.⁵¹³ Evaristo's experimental engagement with the genre of epic-poetry is ambivalent; the text clearly respects its cultural influence in adopting its conventions and at the same time, expresses doubts over its function and value in a contemporary context.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid*, p.84

⁵¹² *Ibid*, p.84

⁵¹³ McConnell, p.105

The Emperor's Babe is the product of a historical and literary excavation which awakens British readers to its authentic cultural past. Evaristo's agenda is clear – she wishes to record the presence of black people in London to recognise the long history of black lives in Britain: 'I like the idea of exploding the myth of Britain as monocultural and pure until 1948 because it is crap really'.⁵¹⁴ Her work is supported by numerous commentators who likewise challenge notions of 'Englishness' in relation to London's history. Sandhu's *London's Calling* investigates narratives of twentieth century British history which align the end of Empire with an influx of postcolonial migration and the subsequent first modern challenge to definitions of Britishness. Sandhu's mapping of contemporary London's relationship to polyculturalism unravels ideas of the black or Asian Londoner as a 'new' concept:

All too often black people and Asians are used in contemporary discourse as metaphors for newness. [...] Overuse by documentary filmmakers of that evocative black-and-white Pathé newsreel of 500 Jamaicans disembarking from the ss Empire Windrush at Tilbury in June 1948 has helped to create a foundation myth, one that obscures many centuries of cheek-by-jowl multiculturalism.⁵¹⁵

Sandhu's commentary contends that multiplicity is inherent to London. Evaristo's and Sandhu's work is therefore in dialogue in its proposing of a move away from perceiving the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948 as the singularly most transformative moment in contemporary London history precisely because of its transportation of a 'new' kind of London inhabitant. Evaristo's research inverts the sense of un-belonging generated by the tense and unwelcoming atmosphere that the Windrush generation arrived into by tracing the long transcultural and transnational settlement of people in London.

Sandhu's and Evaristo's enquiries are further supported by Dave Gunning's comprehensive and insightful study of the text, which focuses on notions of

⁵¹⁴ Evaristo quoted in 'Alastair Niven in conversation with Bernardine Evaristo', *Wasafiri*, 16:34 (2001) [<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02690050108589749>], p.20

⁵¹⁵ Sandhu, p.50

cosmopolitanism in Evaristo's representation of Londinium. It is useful here to delineate the concept of 'cosmopolitanism' and define Gunning's use of the term. The origin of the term 'cosmopolitanism' itself reveals the combined meaning: cosmos, referring to the world and polis, a political community. My own interpretation of cosmopolitanism leans upon this semantic definition, implying a form of world community, which encompasses subjects from different cultures, nations and social backgrounds. Gunning's starting point in using the term to read Evaristo's representation of Roman Londinium resonates with Robert Fine and Vivienne Boon's assessment of the humanism attached to ideas of cosmopolitanism, which argues that it 'involves a recognition of the essential humanity we all share – not so much despite our differences but by virtue of our differences'.⁵¹⁶ Gunning observes that, 'the idea of a homogenous white Britain existing before the era of multiracial immigration is challenged through the creation of a Roman Britain that is emphatically multicultural in its codes and enunciations'.⁵¹⁷ The connection between empathy and notions of cosmopolitanism bolsters Evaristo's motivation to read multiplicity and diversity outside of racial paradigms. In his engagement with Evaristo's representation of a 'cosmopolitan metropolis', Gunning participates in challenging 'the legitimacy of other narratives of the British national past that have been called upon to mould opinions on race' in the twenty-first century.⁵¹⁸ Far from offering a 'happy-clappy' vision of multicultural London, Gunning's analysis points to the more subtle, nuanced ways in which Zuleika struggles to belong in the city she was born and raised in. I agree with Gunning, who argues that 'the city depicted by Evaristo is eminently able to present the cosmopolitan reality of the modern metropolis, but that it is certainly possible to maintain that the model given is less than positive'.⁵¹⁹

In spite of being set over one thousand eight hundred years ago, the text continuously vacillates between the past and the present to scrutinise

⁵¹⁶ Robert Fine and Vivienne Boon, 'Introduction: Cosmopolitanism: between past and future', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 10:1 (2007)

[<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1368431006068751>], p. 6

⁵¹⁷ Dave Gunning, 'Cosmopolitanism and Marginalisation in Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* in *Write Black, Write British* (Ed.) Kadija Sesay (Hertford: Hansib, 2005), p.165

⁵¹⁸ Gunning, p.165

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.167

contemporary societal issues. A trivial example of this underlining juxtaposition resides in Roman Londinium's materialism which emerges as a comment upon contemporary consumerist culture and, at the same time, conveys Evaristo's deliberately anachronistic combining of ancient and modern cultural references. The narcissism of Londinium society is conveyed through the consumption of gossip features in *The Daily Looking Glass*.⁵²⁰ Zuleika's description of her and Felix's home, a villa 'built in the fashionable style of the Med', encapsulates Evaristo's blending of cultural references.⁵²¹ While Zuleika's abbreviation of 'Mediterranean' to denote the style of her and Felix's home echoes the dialect of a twenty-first century London affluent demographic, the 'statue of a snarling Medusa' as the centrepiece of their Roman courtyard seems incongruous in a house with 'central heating'.⁵²² A later description of the Emperor Severus in a 'purple Armani toga', smashing a 'bottle of Dom Falernum / against the wall' to mark his arrival, connects the workings of Empire with structures of power and wealth in twenty-first century society.⁵²³

As Evaristo insists, 'the novel is serious in its intent to situate black history in ancient Britain, and an underlying tragedy runs through its execution. Pain and laughter rub shoulders in the novel'.⁵²⁴ The text brings together the past and present in ways that are simultaneously playful and political. Evaristo's anachronistic presentation of Londinium, drawing parallels between ancient and contemporary society, is reminiscent of Bhabha's theory on postcolonial repetition. 'The postcolonial passage through modernity', he argues, generates a 'form of repetition - the past as projective'.⁵²⁵ I would argue that the most compelling appropriation of the 'past as projective' in *The Emperor's Babe* is Evaristo's representation of the relationship between gender and power hierarchies.

As my engagement with commentaries on the text demonstrate, critics agree that the 'Londinium Evaristo depicts has spaces from which [...] previously-silenced voices can emerge for the very reason that it is not holding on to an idea of a

⁵²⁰ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.174

⁵²¹ *Ibid*, p.65

⁵²² *Ibid*, pp.65-66

⁵²³ *Ibid*, p.170

⁵²⁴ Evaristo quoted in Gustar, p.5

⁵²⁵ Bhabha, 'Race, Time and the Revision of Modernity', p.242

homogenous, contained nationhood'.⁵²⁶ I agree with such readings and endorse Zuleika's loud and rousing narrative voice as a symbol of her confident sense of belonging in Londinium. Yet, I am interested in interrogating Evaristo's portrayal of patriarchal systems in the novel to query the extent to which Zuleika's belonging is subject to conforming to patriarchal models and the ways in which this is an inflection of modern-day London. More specifically, I examine Zuleika's struggle to establish a stable sense of self in a society which shapes her to be an 'obediens' wife from a young age.⁵²⁷

Making Home: Intergenerational belonging

To further understand Zuleika's notion of belonging in Londinium, this section considers Zuleika and her peers' mapping of London to dissect what Gunning terms as a 'second-generation' 'making of London what they want of it'.⁵²⁸ The discussion considers Zuleika's use of hybrid language to negotiate her sense of self in the city and analyses her strong narrative voice to trace evolving intergenerational attitudes towards home within family units represented by herself and her mother.

Zuleika's parents, Anlamani and Qalhata, are refugees from Nubia, now Sudan, and travel to Londinium 'on a donkey, / with only a thin purse and a fat dream'.⁵²⁹ As former slaves of the King of Meroe, the couple's sense of belonging is compromised by their enslavement: 'When you're a slave you dream / of either owning slaves or freeing them'.⁵³⁰ After the King's death, the palace falls into 'chaos' and the couple flee 'famine, plague or flood / (the story always changed)' to seek safety and stability elsewhere, settling in Londinium where Zuleika and her brother, Catullus, are born: I blame my parents, refugees from the Sudan / This was the first place they felt safe, / so they never left'.⁵³¹ The couple's longing for safety and stability motivates their

⁵²⁶ McConnell, p. 108

⁵²⁷ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.14

⁵²⁸ Gunning, p.166

⁵²⁹ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.3

⁵³⁰ *Ibid*, p.25

⁵³¹ *Ibid*, p.154

decision to set up home in Londinium. However, in the presentation of Anlamani and Qalhata's journey to the city, the novel cannot resist replaying clichés of London as the land of opportunity: 'they heard of Londinium, way out in the wild west, / a sea to cross, a man / could make millions of denarii'.⁵³² In alluding to London as a historic magnet for aspirational and economic migration, Evaristo again derails the focus on the Windrush generation's arrival in London in the 1950s to demonstrate that the settlement of people in London is a natural outcome of being a cosmopolitan, urban economic centre.

As the epigraph to this sub-chapter implies, Anlamani's imagining of his original home in Nubia is undercut by the imprisonment implicated in his lack of liberty as a slave: 'We'd try to imagine the world beyond the city, that country a lifetime away that Mum called home and Dad called prison'.⁵³³ Anlamani's attitudes differ from those of his wife, who arguably upholds an idealised image of Nubia as the motherland and subsequently never fully settles in Londinium. In a scene which portrays one of the rare occasion when Zuleika's parents are permitted to visit their daughter at her marital home, while 'Felix was in absentia', the couple's contrasting outlooks are characterised by Qalhata's withdrawn and inconspicuous demeanour⁵³⁴: 'Mum slouched behind him [Anlamani] in her black garb / as usual, head to toe showing only hands / and face'.⁵³⁵ Qalhata's seeming submissiveness, concealing herself behind her husband and 'black garb', is emphasised by the 'slouched' posture she adopts. Coupled with her lack of dialogue, Qalhata's distant and introverted nature serves to exaggerate her daughter's more confident assertion of self in her home town.

The intergenerational differences in attitudes towards home are most pronounced in Zuleika and her mother. Qalhata's lack of engagement with the present insinuates a living in the past which strikes resonance with Ida in 26a: 'I [...] looked over at Mum, / but she'd stopped eating, / was thin as a liquorice stick, preferred / maze

⁵³² *Ibid*, p.26

⁵³³ *Ibid*, p. 12

⁵³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 77

⁵³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 78

and bean stew to haute cuisine any day'.⁵³⁶ Qalhata's thinness and disinterest in food again is the antithesis to Zuleika's appetite for life and living in the present: 'And I don't care about the past / and I ain't writing for posterity'.⁵³⁷ While Qalhata, like Ida, retreats further into an otherworldly realm, Zuleika pursues a combative engagement with the city to seek pleasure and live life to the full. At the end of this chapter, Zuleika observes her mother sitting 'cross-legged on the portico' in a moment of reflection. Zuleika's assessment of the mother and daughter viewing the same sky captures their strikingly contrasting perceptions of the city: 'I looked up at the sky / Mum had been studying. / It was not one and the same'.⁵³⁸ As Gunning notes, '[T]he experience of the generational gap is so vivid that Zuleika and her mother often seem to be experiencing a different city. Their perceptions are so distinct so as to give the impression of taking in discreet geographical locations'.⁵³⁹

The differing outlooks embodied by Zuleika and her mother reflect generational evolving definitions of home. Whereas Qalhata's sense of belonging remains attached to Nubia, Zuleika, born and raised in Londinium, feels an entitlement to the city and all it has to offer. Gunning's analysis further explores intergenerational dynamics and the transition from a migrant mentality to that of an established resident. He articulately explains that:

When her parents managed to complete their journey from sub-Saharan Africa to Londinium, it would seem that their offspring were granted the opportunity to invent themselves as they saw fit [...] this concentration on *becoming* at the expense of roots seems to free Zuleika and her friends from the burden of having to conform to pre-fabricated identities and them to write their own destinies.⁵⁴⁰

Gunning's reading of this generation's construction of selfhood speaks to Zuleika's struggle to adapt to the gendered and cultural expectations imposed upon her by her marriage. Zuleika and her peers seize the opportunity to re-invent themselves

⁵³⁶ *Ibid*, p.81

⁵³⁷ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.85

⁵³⁸ *Ibid*, p.86

⁵³⁹ Gunning, p.168

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp.167-168

and their familial past, fashioning a sense of belonging which reflects the workings of their cosmopolitan, hybrid and heterogeneous identities.

Zuleika's friend and mentor, Venus, embodies the generational outlook which Gunning alludes to. Venus, 'nee Rufus', is a transvestite, who transforms herself through 'ambition / and business acumen' to make a life for herself in Londinium.⁵⁴¹ Venus' trajectory veers in a new direction when she is discovered by her parents as a young adult, dressing up in her sister's clothes and 'sneaking out to date a local shepherd boy'.⁵⁴² She is subsequently disowned by her family and travels to London in search of opportunity. Venus subverts the societal and familial exclusion caused by her natural inclinations to deploy her transsexualism for lucrative means: '[...] after much market research Mount Venus / was created to fill the gap in the market, / and was making a pile'.⁵⁴³ Zuleika notes and admires Venus' dexterity, commenting upon her manipulation of a traditionally London 'cockney' accent to support the performance of her role in this environment: '[...] originally from Camulodunum / on the east coast, she had acquired / an affected mockney accent, / part of *me re-invention package, my dee-yah!*'⁵⁴⁴ Venus cut ties with her past, 'blanking it all out to survive' and to reinvent her future.⁵⁴⁵ She eloquently speaks of the art of 'becoming' in a way that endorses a severing of roots: "The thing is.' She'd say, a life without a past / is a life without roots. As there's no one / holding on to me ankles I can fly anywhere, / I became the woman you see before you'.⁵⁴⁶ Venus' deployment of the phrase purposefully echoes the sentiments of a quotation often attributed to Jamaican political activist Marcus Garvey, but in fact deriving from a pamphlet distributed by Charles Siefert, entitled *The Negro's or Ethiopian's Contribution to Art* in 1938: 'A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots'.⁵⁴⁷ The phrase speaks to a process of decolonisation and reclaiming of authentic cultural and national foundations. Venus' re-interpretation of the eminent phrase participates in Evaristo's depiction of this

⁵⁴¹ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.48

⁵⁴² *Ibid*

⁵⁴³ *Ibid*

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.46

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.48

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.47

⁵⁴⁷ Charles Siefert, *The Negro's or Ethiopian's Contribution to Art* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1938)

generation's mapping of the city - their self-assured navigation of it engenders a new form of belonging which doesn't 'care about the past' in its urge to construct a contemporary cosmopolitan selfhood.

The modernity of this generation is most prominently reflected in the characters' use of language. The narrative voice of *The Emperor's Babe* has been heralded as 'new, confident and rigorous' by critics and reviewers.⁵⁴⁸ Scholars have noted Evaristo's motivation for positioning Zuleika's gregarious and witty voice at the centre of the novel. As Gendusa highlights, the prominence of Zuleika's voice in the novel reinforces the activism entrenched in Evaristo's work in its aim to reorient the ways in which history is told and by whom:

The re-centring of those marginal voices that official historiography has silenced for their being, in the logic of white androcentric normalizing discourse, ethnically and sexually marked is, then, the underlying aim of the novel.⁵⁴⁹

All of the commentaries on the text which I have engaged with are keen to note Zuleika's empowering use of language, which reflects a hybrid form comprised of Latin, contemporary English and an urban street idiom, which she refers to as her 'second-generation plebby creole'.⁵⁵⁰ Evaristo identifies with Zuleika's dialect:

As a Londoner and a "second-generation plebby creole" myself, I was told as a child, as we all were in the 1960s and 1970s, to "go back home," and they didn't mean Woolwich, where I grew up. The country I was born in was the only one I knew, yet as a person of color, I wasn't quite accepted. [...] If only I'd known then that the historical Afro-diasporic presence in Britain has been well recorded since the 1500s – to know that Afro-diasporic roots in Britain run deep – that would have changed my sense of not fully belonging.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁸ Rowan Ricardo Phillips, (Review) '*The Emperor's Babe*', *Callaloo*, 27:2 (2004) [<https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2004.0082>], p.565

⁵⁴⁹ Gendusa, p.58

⁵⁵⁰ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.4

⁵⁵¹ Evaristo quoted in Gustar, pp.5-6

Evaristo mediates her own sense of belonging through Zuleika's narrative. Like Evaristo, Zuleika is born in London to parents who have emigrated from elsewhere; however, unlike Evaristo, Zuleika is not subject to the same feelings of un-belonging precisely because of her racial identity.

I would argue that Zuleika's sense of belonging is not compromised by race; yet, moments in the novel indicate others' awareness of her African heritage. A couplet in the opening pages of the text demonstrates the ways in which Zuleika's race is noted and commented upon as a means of distinguishing her but does not expose her to any form of discrimination: 'Oh, everyone envied me, *Illa Bella Negreeta!* / born in the back of a shop on Gracechurch Street'.⁵⁵² Evaristo's presentation of Zuleika's racial identity is tied to gendered performances. While *The Emperor's Babe* appears to eliminate racial prejudice from Roman Londinium, it does not recoil from exposing the specific ways in which intersectional racial and gendered subjectivity can shape lived experience. In the opening pages of the novel, 'off-duty soldiers' in Roman Londinium's market-place assess the then eleven-year-old Zuleika's 'ripeness': 'watching for lumps / on our chests, to see if our hips grew away / from our waists, always picking me out, / plucking at me in the market, / *Is our little aubergine ready?*'⁵⁵³ The pubescent changes taking place in Zuleika's body are measured and evaluated by the soldiers to trace a sexualised female form in a way in which echoes 'the spotter's' assessment of Bessi's body in the Soho episode in 26a. The comparison between Zuleika and an aubergine encompasses gendered and racialised subjectivity. The metaphor, comparing Zuleika's body to the plump, pear-shaped fruit insinuates a shapely silhouette and bodily contour lines that are perceived as traditionally feminine. At the same time, the choice of an aubergine as the fruit of comparison serves to align its purpled skin with Zuleika's complexion. Evaristo's presentation of the soldiers' racialised and gendered evaluation of Zuleika's appearance reveals the trans-historical objectification of women according to diverse cultural and social paradigms of femininity and beauty.

⁵⁵² Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.3

⁵⁵³ *Ibid*, p.12

In spite of others' noting Zuleika's racial and gendered individuality, derogatory comments such as 'go back home' do not exist in Zuleika's world. The multiplicity inherent to Evaristo's Londinium defines it as a space in which different racial and cultural identities are in dialogue with one another on a daily basis. Gunning's analysis further emphasises the intersection of different cultures and traditions embodied by Evaristo's use of language:

Evaristo's use of English, Latin, Italian, Scots and Cockney slang helps to suggest an arena where cultures are intermixed and where any single fixed register will prove insufficient to the task of categorising the social transactions take place within the city.⁵⁵⁴

Zuleika's hybrid use of language emerges as a powerful assertion of her London identity in the city in which she was born and raised.

There are comparisons to be drawn between Zuleika's deployment of language and other contemporary 'second-generation' artists who use language to carve out a space to sustain their own conception of belonging in London. Linton Kwesi Johnson found a voice that spoke with admirable clarity of 'second-generation' experiences of the city in the 1970s and 1980s and, like Zuleika, favours hybrid forms as a means of expression. Johnson adopted language as a strategy of survival in its capacity to form new identities and vernaculars to ensure that his generation's voice was heard. Johnson's 'dub poetry', like Zuleika's 'plebby creole', fuses linguistic and dialectical conventions to find a voice that is both vocal and representative. Johnson's poetry is emblematic of the progression of verbal resistance that fought against the social and cultural injustice experienced by the black community in 1970s and 1980s London. It is bravely confrontational, manipulating the hypnotic rhythm of reggae combined with stirring language to offer a form of regeneration: 'the bass and rhythm and trumpet double up, / team-up with drums for a deep down searching'.⁵⁵⁵ Through revisiting Caribbean musical foundations and collaborating them with acute and powerful language, Johnson found a liberated form of surviving a city afflicted with institutional racism: 'dig down to the root of the pain; / shape it into violence for the

⁵⁵⁴ Gunning, p166

⁵⁵⁵ Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'Reggae Sounds' in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2006)

people'.⁵⁵⁶ Johnson's poetry embodies resistance, producing a new model of surviving the city for 'second-generation' subjects through performance poetry.

Zuleika shares aspirations of becoming a performance poet and is excited by having found a means through which to assert herself through language: 'I've started composing a few ditties. / At last I've found a way to express myself'.⁵⁵⁷ Evaristo's reluctance to present Zuleika's negotiation of belonging and un-belonging as stereotyped or cliché is represented by the comical egotism which undercuts her turn to poetry. Zuleika's artistic motivations clearly differ from those of Johnson as she strategically organises a symposium to showcase her work as an opportunity to perform her poetry to attract the attention of her lover, Severus:

'I've been scribbling away for years now,
I want exposure. I want recognition

I want a standing ovation!
In truth I wanted Severus to hear of my work,

[...]

to know of my talent through the acclaim
of an adoring public to see⁵⁵⁸

While Zuleika's turn to poetry at first seems affected and insincere, it offers a means of working through her feelings of belonging independently from the relationships that she has with both Felix and Severus.

Identity Crisis: Who is she?

*Am I the original Nubian princess
From Mother Africa
Does the Nile run through my blood
In this materfutuo urban jungle
Called Londinium!
Do I feel a sense of lack
Because I am swarthy?
Or am I just a groovy chick
Living in the lap of luxury?*

⁵⁵⁶ Johnson, 'Reggae Sounds', p.17

⁵⁵⁷ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.85

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p.191

*Am I a slave or a slave owner?
 Am I a Londinio or a Nubian?
 Will my children be Roman or Nubinettes?
 Were my parents vassals or pharaohs?
 And who gives a damn!*⁵⁵⁹

Zuleika's poem epitomises Evaristo's oscillation between comedy and tragedy, the trivial and the crucial. The sincerity of Zuleika's self-querying '*Who is she?*', evaluating her relationship to '*Mother Africa*' and Londinium, is undercut by the colloquial tone of phrases such as 'groovy chick'. While contemporary cosmopolitan phrases such as 'urban jungle' and 'lap of luxury' cement Zuleika's belonging in London, the poem conveys a profound engagement with her cultural and racial parentage too. The use of the term '*swarthy*' depicts one of the rare moments in which Zuleika reflects upon her racial identity as a manifestation of self and symbolises the deep enquiry into her sense of belonging which the poem presents. Questions of origins are considered through conjuring images of blood lines, cultural heritage and social status with the emphatic repetition of '*Am I?*' signalling an air of insecurity previously unseen in Zuleika's character. The contemplative tone of the poem is undermined by the final line, '*And who gives a damn*', which appears to rebuff the meditative exploration of self, signified by the body of the poem. Zuleika's assertion reflects the fickle aspect of her character - which the reader is accustomed to by this stage of the novel - but equally symbolises a dismissal of roots symbolic of her generation's intention to discard the past and embrace the present.

The poem exposes Zuleika's internal negotiation of belonging which is, for the most part, compellingly masked by her outward self-assurance. Yet, the novel also offers glimpses of Zuleika's anxiety around belonging. Zuleika proudly asserts that 'my father spoke pidgin-Latin, / we ate off our laps in the doorway, / splattered with mud. Yet I was Roman too. / *Civis Romana sum*. It was all I had'.⁵⁶⁰ Her deployment of the phrase '*Civis Romana sum*', from Cicero's *In Verrem*, represents a calling upon a relic of classical Roman culture as a plea to have access to all of the rights attached to being a Roman citizen. A tactful endorsement of Cicero symbolises Zuleika's

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.201

⁵⁶⁰ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.54

conforming to the 'master language' as a means of assimilation. It is useful to recall Audre Lorde's empowering work on the imitation of language and culture as an instrument for maintaining suppressive power structures:

It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.⁵⁶¹

Zuleika is simultaneously proud and insecure of her capacity to traverse Roman and Nubian cultural boundaries. Zuleika's confident navigation of her city and claims to Londinium powerfully overturn familiar representations of the black woman subject as occupying a marginal position. Nevertheless, her intricate wider relationship with and position in Roman society is elucidated by an exchange with her sister-in-law, Antistia, in which Zuleika's belonging is called into question. Antistia insists that Zuleika is and will always be excluded from the 'real' Roman community:

You will never been one of us'
[...]

'A real Roman is born and bred,
I don't care what anyone says,

and that goes for the emperor too,
jumped-up *Leebyan*. Felix will never

take you to Rome, Little Miss *Nooobia*,
he has his career to think of.⁵⁶²

Considering that Britannia is described as a 'less than dazzling little colonia' and a 'far flung northern outpost of empire' at other stages of the novel, Zuleika's status as a Londinio plays into Antistia's suggestion of her inferior position.⁵⁶³ As the quotation makes clear, Rome itself is marked as the centre of Empire, the

⁵⁶¹Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, p. 112

⁵⁶² Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.53

⁵⁶³ *Ibid*, p.15 and p.41

connections to power and influence there evident in Felix's concern for his reputation. The question of whether the dynamics of race contribute to Antistia's assessment of Zuleika is a complex one. While Zuleika does not appear to be the subject of any form of racism in the novel, her cultural heritage is repeatedly a point of reference and here provides an opportunity for Antistia to disparage her. Zuleika's exclusion from an elite 'Roman' group points to a systematic form of prejudice which does not derive from race, rather cultural and social identities. Based on her research, Evaristo contends that, 'the Romans did not practice anti-black racism'.⁵⁶⁴ Zuleika is all too aware of her status within her marriage, reiterating the sentiment of Antistia's speech when she states that '[T]he only original thing he (Felix) did was to wed / below his class, even then he hid me away'.⁵⁶⁵ While Roman society does not uphold a myth of ethnic homogeneity, it does cultivate culturally-biased power relations. As Gendusa proposes, Antistia's comments present 'Roman Britannia' not as a 'racist society', but an 'ethnocentric one'.⁵⁶⁶ Gunning's analysis of Antistia's treatment of both Zuleika's and the Emperor Severus' cultural background exposes the ways in which the episode remarks upon power structures within the contemporary city:

Those who hold power are able to define the criteria for inclusion within the circle of influence. Even Severus's achievement does not necessarily allow him the right to participate within this group. Membership is always granted or withdrawn by the existing elite [...].⁵⁶⁷

Zuleika's later attempt to re-position herself within this structure, conducting an affair with the Emperor himself, which emerges as a 'symbol of empowerment', is short-lived.⁵⁶⁸ In spite of Zuleika's socially mobile trajectory, infiltrating the very centre of the Roman Empire through relationships with men, her fate ultimately lies in the hands of a patriarchal system which punishes her for flouting her marital home.

⁵⁶⁴ Evaristo quoted in Niven, p.18

⁵⁶⁵ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.247

⁵⁶⁶ Gendusa, p.54

⁵⁶⁷ Gunning, p.172

⁵⁶⁸ Evaristo quoted in Niven, p.16

The implications of Antistia's interrogation of Zuleika's cultural lineage manifest themselves in suppressive ways, quelling her speech: 'My tongue became wood. / I could never speak in her presence / or to Felix's cronies, who spoke / as if they owned the world. Well, / I guess they did'.⁵⁶⁹ The practices of the Roman Empire are again aligned with the British one, the suppression of voice echoing colonial customs' permeation of innermost human realms. Antistia's assertion of power over Zuleika serves to remind the reader of the fragility of Zuleika's generation's assertiveness in the face of hegemonic power structures. The confrontation with Antistia, which challenges Zuleika's place in her wider society, arrests her most compelling instrument for an assertion for self, her voice.

Microcosmic/London-centric Belonging

The representation of microcosmic communities in London extends across the work by all three authors. Here, it is productive to recall Vivien's mapping of north London in Levy's *Never Far from Nowhere* precisely because it demonstrates the ways in which small geographic areas operate as micro-versions of London. Until she departs London to attend art college in Canterbury, Vivien's world encompasses the N4 postcode in which she lives and goes to school in and occasionally extends to social outings to Upper Street and Angel to eat chips and peruse the menus of upmarket restaurants. Within *The Emperor's Babe*, Evaristo fashions an ancient form of London-centricity to forge connections between Londinium 211 AD and the contemporary city.

Zuleika's rootedness in Londinium is indisputable. As Zuleika confesses, 'I was born in this town, but I've never been outside'.⁵⁷⁰ Zuleika's strong sense of belonging in the city is countered by an incapacity to live anywhere other than Londinium. As the quotation selected as an epigraph to this section of the chapter suggests, Zuleika's envisioning of a 'world beyond the city' is limited. The belonging she feels in the city is undermined by her little knowledge of living outside of the city. As she

⁵⁶⁹ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p. 53

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p.154

acknowledges, 'this great stone wall / which circummures us. I have never left its gates. What *is out* there?'⁵⁷¹ The fortitude of the 'stone wall' which surrounds the city alludes to London as an enclosed space which impounds its inhabitants. Zuleika's speculations of life 'out there', beyond the city walls, further emphasises her detachment from a world outside the city in which she was raised. The sentiment of Zuleika's comment provokes a sense of confinement and supports Gunning's assertion that 'the city-space which seems to open up so many opportunities for Zuleika is translated into a place where a different order of restrictions prevails and is imposed upon her'.⁵⁷² The image of Londinium as a 'prison' translates to Zuleika's relationship with a city that is simultaneously imprisoning and liberating.

The motif of Zuleika's confinement derives from her domestic home and marriage and extends to her relationship with the city. The city emerges as a symbol of Zuleika's entrapment in her marriage. Zuleika is clearly aware of the restrictions marriage places upon her mobility and freedom: 'this becomes my world to adjust / to married life, / I am not let out, he says / he is too selfish to share his new bride / just yet, imagine this is our honeymoon / you are in a cocoon'.⁵⁷³ Zuleika becomes a prisoner in a home to which she feels no sense of belonging. She longs for the sights, smells and sounds of the lively London streets which she had rambled around as a younger woman. A nostalgic visit to her 'old stomping ground' with Alba opens her world, albeit temporally, to the plurality of urban life:

[...] A flower-seller
 sold vibrant bouquets, an ivory-vendor

 sold tusks from Kenya, mirrors hung
 from shop doorways, the scent of oils

 from Arabia and Ethiopia floated
 out of perfumeries [...]⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.109

⁵⁷² Gunning, p.168

⁵⁷³ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.33

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p.40

The milieu exemplifies Evaristo's representation of transcultural and cosmopolitan influences embedded in Londinium life and simultaneously, emphasises Zuleika's forced detachment from an environment where she feels at home. The visit evokes a feeling of loss in Zuleika's mind, 'how I loved and missed it all'.⁵⁷⁵ Zuleika's feeling at home in this environment subverts the micro-cosmic to macro-cosmic scale of belonging fashioned by Georgia in Evans' 26a. The anxiety provoked by Georgia's exposure to the loud and vivacious atmosphere of Central London contrasts with the contentment evoked in Zuleika when wandering the animated streets of Londinium. The two characters' sense of belonging and un-belonging in London exist at polar opposite ends of the spectrum. While Georgia defines the loft at 26a Waifer Avenue as her home, a haven away from the 'roaring' noises of the wider city, Zuleika feels like a captive in her marital home and most at home on the streets of Londinium.⁵⁷⁶

As Gunning notes, '[...] the ability of the characters (and especially of Zuleika) to traverse cultural boundaries and invent new ways of being is eventually revealed to be severely restricted'.⁵⁷⁷ From the outset, Zuleika's marriage to Felix is presented by Evaristo as a means of restricting her freedom and destabilising her belonging. The fact that the chapter presenting the arrangements for Zuleika's upwardly mobile marriage to Felix is entitled 'Betrayal' illustrates Zuleika's attitude towards her husband.⁵⁷⁸ The exchange which takes place between Anlamani and Felix encapsulates Zuleika's microcosmic incarceration in her marriage, framed by a broader entrapment in a suppressive patriarchal society. Felix reassures Zuleika's father that 'you will benefit greatly from this negotium. / I think we can safely say that your business is due to expand considerably'.⁵⁷⁹ Gendusa's commentary on the scene assist in understanding its enshrining of systems of power which subjugate Zuleika:

[...] deeply rooted in the narrative fabric is the unveiling of forms of gender discrimination which Zuleika is subjected to not only in the relationship with her

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid*

⁵⁷⁶ Evans, 26a, p.150

⁵⁷⁷ Gunning, p.173

⁵⁷⁸ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.14

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.17

husband, but also within her own patriarchal family [...] their union is the result of an actual exchange between two men: her father and her future husband. Talking to his future father-in-law, Felix himself hints at a sort of pre-marital verbal contract.⁵⁸⁰

The negotiations between Felix and Anlamani revolve around Zuleika's value as a wife, her youth and beauty both treated as valuable commodities in the exchange: 'she is so... exquisita'.⁵⁸¹ Anlamani's endorsement of his daughter as a 'very obediens girl, sir', emphasising submissiveness and an inclination to compliance, conforms to a model of marriage which he believes will appeal to Zuleika's future husband: 'very placid, no back-chat'.⁵⁸² Tied to this depiction of the dutiful wife is Zuleika's virginity, which maintains high cultural value in the talks. Evaristo's portrayal of floral imagery to encompass Felix's allusion to the couple's consummation parodies archaic affiliations of female virginity with the innocent beauty of nature: 'I wanted someone young, / someone specialis, a rare flower'.⁵⁸³ Undercutting Evaristo's mockery of such patriarchal interpretations of gendered sexuality is the reality of Zuleika's fate as a child-bride, non-consensually married to a 'man thrice [her] age and thrice [her] girth': 'I was spotted at the baths of Cheapside, just budding, and my fate was sealed'.⁵⁸⁴ Zuleika's first sexual encounters pre-empt any hormonal or biological sexual urges: 'You see, I discovered sex before desire'.⁵⁸⁵

The implications of Zuleika's marriage to Felix jeopardise her belonging in Londinium. Within the structure of marriage, restrictions to Zuleika's self-fashioning of belonging are imposed through gendered hierarchies. Through the representation of Zuleika's sexual encounters with men, Evaristo exposes the ways in which women's sexuality is 'constructed in relation to male sexuality but this relationship is founded on a gender hierarchy in which men are dominant and

⁵⁸⁰ Gendusa, p.53

⁵⁸¹ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.15

⁵⁸² *Ibid*, pp.14-15

⁵⁸³ *Ibid*, p.15

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p.4

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p.98

women are subordinate socially, economically, politically and sexually'.⁵⁸⁶ Evaristo notes the role that sex plays in Zuleika's negotiation of self:

For Zuleika sex becomes a symbol of her oppressive relationship with her husband. And it also becomes a symbol of her empowerment when she has her relationship with Severus. The way she takes control of her relationship with Severus is through her sexuality, which in a sense is the only way that is open to her.⁵⁸⁷

Zuleika's sexual relationship with her husband derives from a duty to satisfy his sexual appetite: 'it had been so long / since I had been held without it being a precursor / to a demand for sex – non-negotiable'.⁵⁸⁸ The assertion of patriarchal power embroiled in the sexual relationship between Zuleika and Felix encapsulates Evaristo's subversive representation of the domestic space as a comforting and safe home.

Zuleika's alignment of marital sex with displeasure extends to the establishment of a rapport between sex and death, reminding the reader of hierarchical violence implicated in sex. This is encapsulated by the final emphatic yet hauntingly simple couplet of the chapter entitled, 'Til Death Do Us': 'I woke up, it was my first night / in the Kingdom of the Dead'.⁵⁸⁹ Phillips's review of the text implies that Zuleika's 'sexual relationship with him [Felix] is obligatory at best, his corpulence causing her disgust'.⁵⁹⁰ Zuleika is emotionally and physically imprisoned by a marital duty to have unpleasurable and seemingly non-consensual sex with her husband. Felix's treatment of Zuleika as a possession is reinforced by ancient values attached to marriage which enshrine male supremacy. Nancy Caronia's feminist reading of the relationship further reinforces the inequality engendered by their sexual relationship:

Felix traps her within a "white stucco villa [in] Cheapside" that he inhabits only "three months a year."
(74) When he is home, he uses her sexually without

⁵⁸⁶ Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons, Kathleen Lennon and Rosalind Minsky 'Gender and Sexuality' in *Theorizing Gender: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p.121

⁵⁸⁷ Evaristo quoted in Niven, p.16

⁵⁸⁸ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.36

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.29

⁵⁹⁰ Phillips, p. 568

thought for her desire or physical limitation. She regularly “pass[es] ... out” during intercourse, but Felix continues to pleasure himself with her body.⁵⁹¹

Felix’s sexual encounters with his wife disturbingly verge on the boundaries of rape: ‘He laid me out, peeled off my layers / [...] and held a candle to my vulva until flames tried to exit my mouth as a scream / but his hand was clamped over it. I passed out’.⁵⁹² The suppression of voice compounds Zuleika’s helplessness, emphasising the alarming imbalance in sexual dynamics between husband and wife. Zuleika’s physical relationship with her husband is far from mutual, Felix’s treatment of her body appearing abusive. His seeming disregard for the non-consensual nature of their sexual relationship furthers emphasises Zuleika’s vulnerability in the private realm of their marital home. Marriage emerges as a catalyst for isolation in drawing Zuleika away from interactions with the wider city and retreating further into the precarious space of her home with Felix.

In keeping with the tone of the text as a whole, Zuleika endeavours to defy traditional narratives of gendered tragedy and resists her fate from being defined in such simple terms. Zuleika counters her un-belonging in her marriage by attempting to break free from her gendered oppression in pursuit of pleasure. As Phillips notes, ‘Zuleika begins to play with the idea that desire is something worth making changes for, despite the risks’.⁵⁹³ Zuleika becomes a heroine with ambitions of sexual transgression, who seeks belonging beyond the confines of her marriage through an affair with the Emperor Severus: ‘I knew you would make my world larger. / It was so small, inside and out, / I would discover more of myself through you’.⁵⁹⁴ The relationship, described as ‘a euphoric summer of love’ demonstrates a mutuality in sex that she has previously not experienced⁵⁹⁵:

we walk
back to the tent, me

⁵⁹¹Nancy Caronia, ‘Resisting Displacement in Bernardine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe*’ in *Madness in Black Women’s Diasporic Fictions: Aesthetics of Resistance*, (Eds.) Caroline A. Brown and Johanna X. K. Garvey (E-book: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) [DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58127-9_2], p. 24

⁵⁹² Evaristo, *The Emperor’s Babe*, p.29

⁵⁹³ Phillips, p. 567

⁵⁹⁴ Evaristo, *The Emperor’s Babe*, p.220

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p.224

leading you,
 we dry each other off, gently,

 with soft towels,
 lie down together,

 wrapped in ourselves⁵⁹⁶

The noticeably different use of pronouns to describe her sexual union with Severus, repeating the terms 'we' and 'our', contrasts with the repetition of 'he' referring to Felix's actions in previous accounts. In comparison to her sexual encounters with Felix, the encounter that occurs between Zuleika and Septimus is erotic, fulfilling and equalising, introducing pleasure to a woman who had until this point been denied it. Zuleika's simile comparing sexual climax with an erupting volcano ensnares the intense passion and delight of the scene: 'my body is erupting / like a volcano, [...] / I am on fire'.⁵⁹⁷

Undercutting this moment of discovery is the knowledge that Zuleika is killed as a result of her sexual transgressions at the age of 'only eighteen'⁵⁹⁸:

A husband could do what he liked
 and many an errant wife ended up

 in an unmarked grave outside the city walls.
 I did not scream, though, hammering

 on the door for forgiveness,
 but accepted what was due⁵⁹⁹

Zuleika is denied her sense of fulfilment. The novel celebrates women's potential pleasure in sex, but equally draws attention to trans-historical anxieties concerning female sexual transgression and liberation. Notions of female sexuality are often associated with frenzy, a hysteric sexuality that is considered uncontrollable and

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p.228

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p.230

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p.250

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p.242

precarious with the semantics of 'hysteria', originating from the Latin word for 'of the womb' (*hystericus*) binding female sexuality with a sense of disorder and wildness that threatens the patriarchal order. Caronia's study of the text reinforces this traditional alignment of female sexuality and madness, focusing on representations of black women subjects' resistance in British novels and querying the reasons behind this form of resistance being read as a sign of madness or hysteria. Her analysis of Zuleika is useful in understanding the ways in which the character's sexuality disrupts both a literary and historic tradition which positions the heroic male character at the centre of the plot: 'Zuleika writes her life story to avoid erasure. In carving out that space, she destabilises familiar colonial and postcolonial tropes of the black female as blank canvas, muse, or madwoman in the attic'.⁶⁰⁰ Zuleika's active pursuit of a fulfilling sexual and romantic relationship represents a deliberate attempt to secure belonging and pleasure outside the restrictions of her marriage.

The novel concludes with Zuleika being betrayed by her servants, Valeria and Aemilia, who divulge details of her affair to Felix. Zuleika is punished by her husband by gradual poisoning through her food, 'arsenicum hidden in spicy sauces', and suffers a slow and painful death at the age of only eighteen.⁶⁰¹ Zuleika's suffering is compounded by her incarceration, as she acknowledges that, '[M]y home had become my mausoleum'.⁶⁰² The shrinking of Zuleika's world from wandering the vivacious streets of Londinium to not being 'allowed out of the house' convey the compromises to her own sense of belonging which marriage inflicts upon her. She notes the injustice of gender power hierarchies, declaring that, '[A] husband could do what he liked / and many an errand wife ended up / in an unmarked grave outside the city walls'.⁶⁰³ While Felix's affairs in Rome are condoned, Zuleika's gender and social positioning seal her fate. Zuleika's narrative illuminates the ways in which the absence of certain societal structures encourage other systems of power to reign.

⁶⁰⁰ Caronia, p.31

⁶⁰¹ Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe*, p.241

⁶⁰² *Ibid*, p.243

⁶⁰³ *Ibid*, p.242

Zuleika's negotiation of belonging and un-belonging uncovers the endurance of patriarchal practices in the city and poses an instructive argument about the precariousness of a sexualised self in the city. She is a timeless representation of a sexually transgressive woman punished at the hands of powerful men. In calling attention to the gender-power relations which shape and ultimately determine Zuleika's trajectory, Evaristo intervenes in timely debates around contemporary gender hierarchies. Evaristo's work clearly encourages readers to re-think traditional modes of thinking and reading. In the case of *The Emperor's Babe*, the author succeeds in contributing to the important work undertaken by Fryer to untangle the misconceived ideas of the relationship between notions of 'Britishness' and racial and cultural singularity. At the same time, in her representation of Zuleika's experiences in Roman Londinium, Evaristo exposes the trans-historical assertion of patriarchal systems which subject women to multiple forms of discrimination. In forging connections between Londinium and the present-day metropolis, *The Emperor's Babe* illustrates that the city remains plagued by ancient inequalities that are exaggerated for a figure such as Zuleika, who is subjugated on the basis of her gender, age and social status.

Twenty-first Century Belonging in London

John Akomfrah's documentary, *The Stuart Hall Project* captures Stuart Hall remarking that 'I can't go back to any one origin—I'd have to go back to five; when I ask people where they're from, I expect nowadays to be told an extremely long story'.⁶⁰⁴ Hall's comment upon contemporary modes of belonging speaks powerfully to both Evans' and Evaristo's representations of home in their novels. *26a* and *The Emperor's Babe* reflect twenty-first century definitions of home which promote an 'acceptance of transnational and transcultural identities as a natural outcome of the migration of peoples'.⁶⁰⁵ Reading these novels alongside one another

⁶⁰⁴ Stuart Hall quoted in *The Stuart Hall Project*, (Dir.) John Akomfrah (2013)
[<https://player.bfi.org.uk/subscription/film/watch-the-stuart-hall-project-2013-online>]

⁶⁰⁵ McConnell, p.105

posits a twenty-first century framing of 'feeling at home' consisting of multiple located physical and psychological places of attachment.

26a and *The Emperor's Babe*'s vision of the city is shared. Both novels remark upon the workings of global cities and highlight that the movement of peoples and subsequent interaction of different cultures and traditions is not simply a contemporary reality, but a historic one. Sandhu's analysis reinforces the point that *26a* and *The Emperor's Babe* are trying to make with regard to the migration and settlement of people from elsewhere in London belonging to a much longer history:

Year after year, decade after decade, from one century to the next, black people have come to London, from abroad as well as from other parts of England, by various means - from slave ships to the freezing undercarriages of jet planes - in order to flee poverty, apartheid, ordinariness.⁶⁰⁶

The tone of both novels communicates a longing to move on from debates surrounding race and the connotations attached to black Britishness to forge a twenty-first century version of belonging which accepts the racially and culturally plural identity of London.

The terrain of belonging and un-belonging in black British writing and its scholarly reception may appear to be hackneyed and yet as this chapter has made clear, Evans' and Evaristo's novels open up a fresh discursive space for understanding belonging as neither a final nor permanent state of being. The writers' representations of home speak to a generation of Londoners who recognise the transience, fleetingness and 'in-between-ness' of belonging in complex, fast-paced contemporary urban environments. *26a*'s and *The Emperor's Babe*'s representations of the city and the characters' mapping of it reflect contemporary transcultural modes of cosmopolitan belonging, progressing traditional representations of bildungsroman narratives in black British women's writing to map the social, cultural, racial and gendered factors which contribute to a subject's capacity to belong. Bessi's, Georgia's and Zuleika's negotiations of self extend beyond the subjectivity attached to being a black or

⁶⁰⁶ Sandhu, p.56

mixed-race woman to offer a nuanced, human and complex rendering of belonging in the city. The protagonists' relationship with the city reflects a sense of belonging that is detached from migrant or even diasporic mentalities, navigating *their* city with confidence. Evans' and Evaristo's examination and questioning of belonging and un-belonging in London manifest themselves in a remapping of the city which evolves postcolonial preoccupations of displacement from the motherland to articulate a London-ness which embodies the complex cosmopolitanism and dynamism of the contemporary metropolis.

Chapter Five

Conclusion:
Establishing Productive Paradigms through which to Read Black British
Women's Writing

*[...] there is still work to do*⁶⁰⁷

This thesis has mapped and re-mapped the terrain of London literature by exploring the possibilities for re-thinking trajectories of urban life through an engagement with three contemporary black British women writers. As London's diasporic identity becomes increasingly diverse, the re-mapping of this area of British literary culture is both timely and urgent. Critical and scholarly discourses must now establish a productive model through which to read this body of literature beyond the divisions which have so often defined it.

Engaging with the selected novels by Evans, Evaristo and Levy as 'London literature' has provided a critical lens through which to assess these writers' mapping and re-

⁶⁰⁷ Evaristo, 'Why is it still rare to see a black British woman with literary influence?', *The Guardian*, December 2013 [<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/13/rare-black-british-woman-literary-influence>]

mapping of the city according to different gendered, racial, cultural, sexual and social experiences of it. The thesis has explored subjects and themes within the novels as examples of black British women's writing which, in 2018, might appear to be exhausted and, in fact, clichéd, including, for example, belonging, embodiment, motherhood and inter-generational tensions. Through my exploration of such representations, I have sought to demonstrate the ways in which applying these familiar thematic paradigms in new cultural and geographic spaces creates possibilities for this work to be assessed according to a much more diverse and wide-ranging theoretical and critical spectrum. In re-appropriating ideas of performances of passing, more often identified in African-American literature, I have equally attempted to offer some entirely new perspectives on the renderings of subjects' potential to transcend gendered, racial and sexual particularities in a London context. Locating the selected texts alongside the central concerns of my thesis, namely to establish an alternative model for reading this work according to more productive and fluid critical frameworks, has uncovered a noticeable shift in black British writing. Whereas Levy's early novels conform to familiar bildungsroman narratives depicting black women subjects' exposure to explicit gendered and racial prejudice of 1970s-1980s London, Evans' *26a* reflects a twenty-first century cosmopolitanism which accepts and indeed encourages transcultural modes of being in the city. I would argue that Evaristo's and Evans's millennial texts re-define constructions of 'black Britishness' in order to map new trajectories of the contemporary Londoner. At the same time, such narratives exemplify the ways in which critical discourses have not adequately attended to the cultural, gendered and social challenges that these texts present. As the epigraph to this chapter contends, 'there is still work to do' and this thesis has sought to begin a more responsive and accommodating critical conversation around this work.

A focus on London has enabled me to share a passion for the place with the selected writers, indulging a longstanding interest in both the city I was born and raised in and the literature written about it. Nevertheless, deploying London as a lens through which to read this work has also awakened me to deeply rooted tensions and paradoxes which challenge appraisals of the city as inclusive, cosmopolitan and accommodating. In placing these texts alongside one another, my reading has

identified a number of vexing ambivalences and contradictions which underpin preoccupations surrounding this area of contemporary British literature. The quandary deriving from discursive approaches to black British women's writing appears to be irresolvable. The representations of London lives presented by Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's texts demonstrate the nuanced manner in which subjects are perpetually defined according to social and cultural constructs of identity-categories. There is a telling irony to be understood in the simultaneous celebration and criticism of London which these novels present. Despite both *The Emperor's Babe* and *26a's* publication dates coinciding with the political and cultural promotion of the phenomenon of 'multiculturalism', the texts challenge, in varying degrees of subtlety, ideas of London as a convivial hive of cultural, ethnic and racial identities living harmoniously alongside one another. Across the temporal, cultural and social settings which the novels create, the writers expose the endurance of dominant modes of seeing gender and race according to socially and culturally constituted conventions. While the writers adopt distinctive approaches to their exposure of oppressive and hegemonic systems of power, their characters' trajectories are unavoidably shaped and, in the case of *Never Far from Nowhere's* Olive and *The Emperor's Babe's* Zuleika, defined by such structures. Their inability to 'conform' to accepted normative models of being in the city renders them marginalised and unfulfilled respectively. The writers' interest in presenting such limiting definitions of race and gender carries a certain activism which calls for London communities to embrace difference and communicate across gendered, racial and cultural lines.

In light of the upcoming publication of Evans' new novel, *Ordinary People*, I eagerly await a critical revival of this writer's work which this publication may inaugurate and the possibility for extending more nuanced and dynamic ways of reading Evans' work.⁶⁰⁸ Notwithstanding the commercial success of writers such as Smith and Levy, the work by black British women continues to maintain a marginal position within contemporary literature. A perennial pattern has arisen from the lack of

⁶⁰⁸ See Lisa Alladice, 'It wasn't until my sister passed away that I had a story to tell: An interview with Diana Evans', *The Guardian*, 19 March 2018 [<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/19/diana-evans-interview-ordinary-people>]

opportunities for black writers to secure publishing deals with larger, established publishing houses and to be included on English department's syllabi on courses outside of 'postcolonial studies': 'It seems the industry likes to champion one or two of us at a time, but no more. [...] Some will wheel out names of the usual suspects, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. Yes, I know about them, but they are just two writers from the past 15 years [...]'.⁶⁰⁹ Okojie's assessment of the publishing challenges facing black British women writers is interconnected with scholarship's treatment of the work. It is increasingly important that academic institutions and, subsequently, students from diverse ethnic, social and gendered backgrounds engage with this area of contemporary literature. As African-American theorist, Sandra J. Richards, noted over twenty-years ago: 'It is time that white women and men began to participate in the project of bringing more black women's writing [...] to critical attention'.⁶¹⁰ In the process of demolishing gendered and racial partitions, we must now actively take the necessary measures to breakdown persistent and obsolete hierarchies that condition what and how we read.

As my engagement with pertinent areas of scholarships makes clear, in the aftermath of the plethora of 'postcolonial' publications concerning representations of black women subjects in the 1980s and 1990s, strident activism has been replaced by a certain complacency suggesting that the battle has been won. Evaristo's activism however has far from lulled: 'Unfortunately, the outspoken lobbying and kamikaze arts activism of the 1980s has been succeeded by polite acceptance and muted protest'.⁶¹¹ The author's pro-active approach is one that I fully support and endorse:

Three decades on, black women are still rarely in positions of power. We remain the creatives and not the career makers. We are chosen but do not choose, and the elite networks of power continue to perpetuate themselves.⁶¹²

⁶⁰⁹ Okojie

⁶¹⁰ Sandra J. Richards, 'Women, Theatre and Social Action', quoted in Lizbeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.148

⁶¹¹ Evaristo, 'Why is it still rare to see a black British woman with literary influence?'

⁶¹² *Ibid*

Evaristo's rousing powerful call for a re-evaluation of this body of British literature rightly criticises persistent labelling which intensifies its 'marginalised status'.⁶¹³ Her continued campaigns to integrate the work by black British women writers into contemporary British cultural canons is again confronted by the quandary of wanting to resist being categorised according to her gender and race. Evaristo is repeatedly called upon to communicate the concerns of black British women writers in public discourses and in turn is presented as a spokesperson for the very identity-categories which she wishes to dis-identify herself from. This burden of representation is creatively limiting, with its attendant expectations of endorsing depictions of 'multiculti' Britain.⁶¹⁴ Such a dilemma encapsulates the struggle academics, journalists and writers alike are confronted by in addressing this work outside of gendered and racial paradigms.

It strikes me as increasingly important to demand intersectional readings of this work which are sensitive to the specific cultural, social, gendered and racial contexts from which they emerge. To ignore such sensibilities would be to offer a homogenous depiction of London which overlooks the different ways in which gendered factors impact and complicate a subject's relationship to the space around them, misleadingly accepting the notion of a consistent or stable sense of place. Such an argument is exemplified by the theatricality of Bessi's gendered performance in *26a* being intensified by the 'showbiz' cultural backdrop on which it is performed or the assessment of Vivien's body as 'exotic' in the everyday setting of her local north London pub. As Glave powerfully asserts: 'For the majority of us, the practice of single-focus politics is essentially always impossible, given that virtually none of us on this planet occupies a single-focus existence'.⁶¹⁵ Glave's analysis assists in understanding the nuanced approach which this work warrants, moving across discursive boundaries which readers have previously been reluctant to cross.

While I have attempted to adopt new strategies in my approach to these texts, I continue to find the labels connected to the work in this genre of literature problematic. A politics of language emerges from engagements with and discussions

⁶¹³ *Ibid*

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid*

⁶¹⁵ Glave, p.7

of Evans', Evaristo's and Levy's novels. When I commenced this project, I thought that the terms 'black' and 'women' were no longer progressive or capacious enough to assess this area of literature. Precisely, how do we define 'black British women's writing' and which words or labels encapsulate the nuanced mappings and re-mappings of London which these novels present? While I did not set out to reconcile the tension around language and the identity-politics it provokes, I have, admittedly, struggled to invent a language which resists repeatedly categorising this work. At the end of this project, I remain even more aware of the difficulty critics and commentators face in stepping outside discourses surrounding race and gender in relation to this body of British literature. I am however now more optimistic about the productive appropriation of these terms in a discursive context having explored several critical spaces for thinking otherwise about these texts. Energised by these new connections forged between the writers discussed in this thesis, I remain hopeful that this mode of reading this area of contemporary British literature will signal a new set of preoccupations in addition to the familiar ones associated with black British writing more generally.

The novels' presentation of a productive 'London-ness', which encompasses subjects across social, cultural, gendered and racial lines, epitomises new articulations of belonging in the contemporary city. In highlighting London as a literary crucible for new formations of black Britishness, this thesis has argued that nuanced readings of the selected texts by Evans, Evaristo and Levy provide the opportunity for beginning a more critically diverse dialogue about these writers and their work; a dialogue that might begin to unravel the very categories inscribed in the title of the thesis itself. While Levy's early narratives draw attention to the need to extend definitions of Britishness, Evaristo's and Evans' novels re-orientate the focus by tracing emerging London identities founded upon versions of selfhood which transcend limiting subjective labels and categories. Through their novels, the writers share an optimism for an inevitable, rather than politically systematic, culturally cosmopolitan future in London.

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